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MAY 2003

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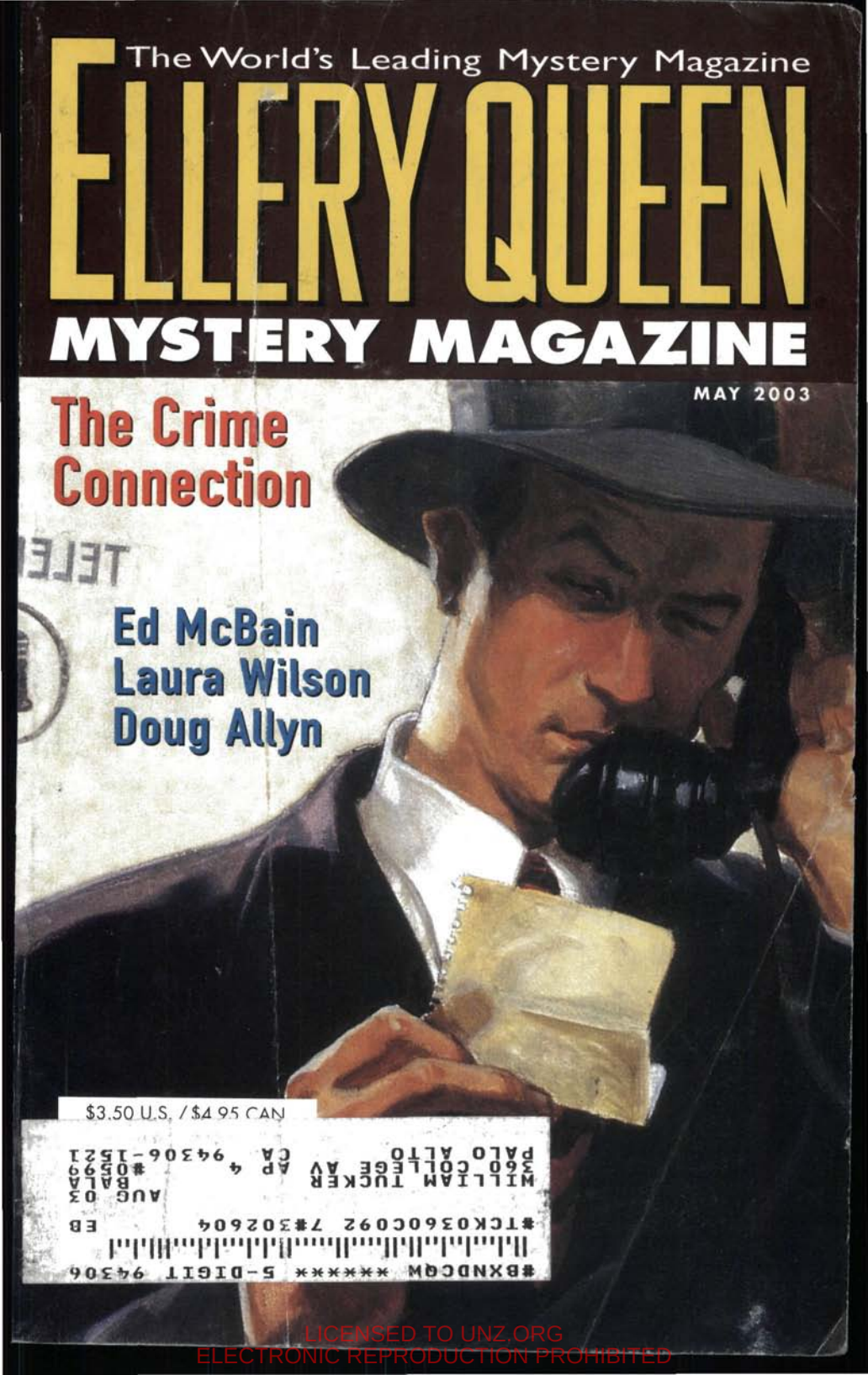

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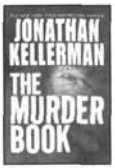

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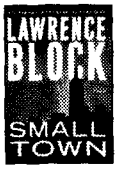

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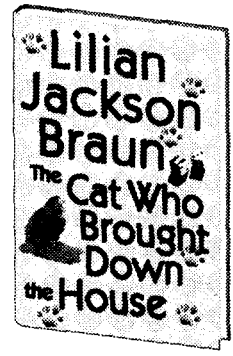

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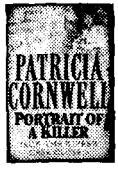

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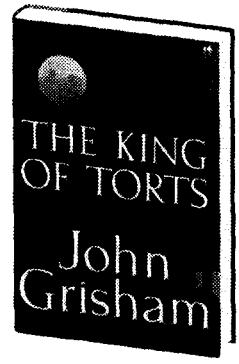

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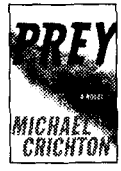

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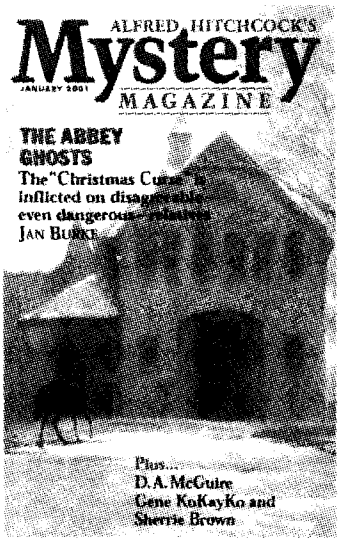

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

A Little Sitdown

by Ed McBain

It was almost two-thirty by the time my nephew and me finished lunch, and I still hadn't told him why I'd asked him to come up to the apartment today. I offered him another glass of wine, which he refused, and then I said, "Have some more coffee, then, another biscotto, what's your hurry?"

"Well, I still got things to do today," he said. "But thanks, Uncle Frank, it was a terrific lunch."

He got up from the dining room table, pushed his chair back under it again, and then came to me and took my hand, and was reaching up to kiss me on the cheek when I said, "There's something we have to discuss, Danny."

"Is there some problem, Uncle Frank?"

"No problem, no problem. Come on in the living room for a minute. This won't take long."

In the other room, early afternoon sunlight streamed through the lace curtains behind the sofa.

"Sit down," I said. "You sure you don't want a glass of wine?"

"I'm fine, Uncle Frank, thanks," Danny said, and sat on the sofa.

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I sat opposite him in an easy chair.

"You want a cigar?"

"No, thanks, I don't smoke."

"You mind if I do?" I struck a match, held it to the end of the cigar, began puffing. Clouds of smoke billowed on the air.

"So," I said.

"So what is it, Uncle Frank?"

"Joey asked me to have a little talk with you."

"Joey? Really? What about?"

He leaned forward all at once, all ears. Blue eyes like my sister's, may she rest in peace. Open wide now, attentive.

"Joey wants me to explain some things you may not realize about the business," I said.

Danny smiled. His mother's smile, too. My sister's smile.

"Are you guys thinking of moving me up?" he asked.

"That depends on whether or not you grasp the situation," I said.

"What's there to grasp?"

He was still smiling, positive now that I'd called him here today to give him a promotion.

"Joey feels there are maybe some principles involved here that you don't understand."

"What principles, Uncle Frank?"

Still smiling. Figuring I was stringing him along before I broke the good news.

"Joey thinks maybe you're losing your sense of direction a little."

And suddenly, he looked worried. He hesitated a moment, and then said, "What do you mean, Uncle Frank?"

I puffed on the cigar again.

"In this city," I said, "there's only so much to go around. You split a pie too many ways, *nobody* gets anything to eat. So what Joey and me done, we established certain principles that govern the way we do business. There's Little Angie's family in Brooklyn, and there's the family me and Joey run here in Manhattan. . . ."

"Okay," Danny said, listening, nodding, understanding. I hoped.

". . . and the way we keep everybody happy is the two families split the candy trade straight down the middle. The other stuff—the little side shit—Joey and me run some of it, Little Angie runs the rest of it. It works out we're cutting the whole pie *mezza*

A Grand Master of the MWA and a recipient of Britain's Diamond Dagger, Evan Hunter, a.k.a. Ed McBain, created, starting in 1956, a series that is already ranked with the classics of mystery fiction. With the publication of *Fat Ollie's Book* (S&S) earlier this year, the still-powerful 87th Precinct series numbers 52 books. Though he is himself the quintessential crime writer, McBain pokes some fun at crime writers and readers in his latest novel. †

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mezza. That's the way the two families worked it out, and that's what keeps everybody happy. No trouble between us, capeesh? That's the way we want it to stay. No changes, capeesh? No trouble."

"I understand," Danny said. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem is, you're banging Little Angie's wife," I said.

"Hey, come on," he said.

"It is Joey's belief that you are banging Little Angie's wife," I said.

"He's mistaken."

"I don't think so, Danny."

"Hey, come on, don't you think I know the rules?"

"I thought you did. I thought I taught you the rules good, Danny."

He got up all at once, began pacing back and forth.

"So why would I do something crazy like that?" he asked. "I mean, come on, Uncle Frank, give me some credit, willya?"

"You're saying you're not," I said, and puffed on the cigar.

"I am definitely not. I would have to be crazy. Go back to Joey, tell him . . ."

"Danny," I said, "where were you last Saturday afternoon?"

"Last Saturday?"

"Last Saturday, yes."

"I went to the track," he said, lying. "Meadowlands," he said, still lying. "I won twelve dollars."

"Joey thinks you were in Greenwich Village," I said. "Joey thinks a beautiful blonde about your age, twenty-two, twenty-three, was in Greenwich Village sitting on a bench outside a cappuccino joint, and out of the shop came you, Danny, with two cups of cappuccino and two chocolate croissants. Joey thinks you sat on the bench next to this beautiful blonde, and Joey thinks you kissed her. In fact, while the two of you were eating the croissants and drinking the cappuccinos, you kept kissing to beat the band, which is perfectly all right for young people to do in public, unless the beautiful blonde happens to be Gloria Santorini, who is Little Angie's wife. Capeesh, Danny?"

He was quiet for several moments, thinking hard. Then he said, "I can't imagine where Joey got that idea. I hardly *know* Little Angie's wife."

"Gloria Santorini. Her maiden name was Di Luca."

"Whoever. I think I may have met her once. When Little Angie's sister got married in Brooklyn, remember?"

"She's very pretty," I said.

"You think so? I guess she's okay. But I gotta tell you, Uncle Frank, she ain't my type."

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"I'm happy to hear that. 'Cause Joey is positive that was you with her in the Village last Saturday."

"Musta been somebody who looked like me."

"Musta been," I said, and puffed on the cigar again, and let out a stream of smoke, and then said, "How about Sunday?"

"Sunday?"

"Were you in Central Park Sunday?"

"This past Sunday?"

"Yes, this past Sunday. Were you in the Central Park zoo?"

"No. I was home watching a ball game on television."

" 'Cause you see, Joey thinks you were in the park with Little Angie's wife."

"I told you. I was home."

"Joey thinks he has reliable information."

"Somebody must be tryin'a mess me up, Uncle Frank."

"You think so, huh?"

"Don't you think I know what kind of trouble this could cause between the families?"

"Then why are you banging her, Danny?"

"But I'm *not!*"

"Danny . . ."

"Uncle Frank, I'm tellin' you the—"

"Danny, last Sunday night, you took her to your building . . ."

"No, I didn't, Uncle Frank."

"You took her upstairs . . ."

"No."

"And you banged her, Danny."

"What makes Joey think . . . ?"

"Somebody saw you, Danny."

"Who? Tell me who."

"Me," I said, and puffed on the cigar. "I'm the one who saw you going upstairs with her, Danny."

His face went pale. He sat down on the sofa as if I'd shoved him down. The room went dead silent.

"This little sitdown today is to tell you to knock it off. Joey and me can't risk this kind of trouble. We worked too hard to get what we got here. You wanna get laid . . ."

"It ain't that."

". . . I'll make a phone call, there'll be a dozen girls up here in a minute, you can screw your brains out day and night! But don't shit where you eat!"

"I said it's *not* that."

"Then what the hell is it?"

"I love her."

"Love, *please,*" I said, and stubbed out the cigar.

"I love her, Uncle Frank."

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"Find somebody else to love."

"I want to marry her."

"She's already married," I said.

"She's gonna leave him," Danny said.

"In a wooden box!" I said. "Listen to me, Danny . . ."

"I mean it, Uncle Frank, we already made plans. He's an old man, she don't love him, she's gonna leave him."

"That would only make things worse! What'd I teach you, nothing? My poor sister must be rolling over in her grave! Don't you know anything about honor? About respect? You run off with Little Angie's wife, you'll wreck everything me and Joey accomplished!"

He got up off the sofa again, and came to me, and dropped on his knees in front of me, and took both my hands in his and said, "Just tell Joey I love her, okay? Explain that to him. We'll be careful, I promise you. And once she leaves him . . ."

I shook off his hands.

"Stop seeing her," I said.

"Don't ask me to do that, Uncle Frank."

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. Me and Joey are telling you. Quit. *Now.*"

"I can't," he said. "I love her. We're gonna leave the city, Uncle Frank. We've been talking about maybe going to Hawaii . . ."

"You better go to the *moon,*" I said. "Quit seeing her, Danny, or . . ."

"Or what?" he said, and got to his feet, and looked me dead in the eye. "Or what, Uncle Frank?"

"What do you think, Danny?"

"Say it."

I took a deep breath, sighed heavily.

"What do you think is more important to Joey?" I asked. "You or this thing we accomplished here?"

"What's more important to *you,* Uncle Frank?" he asked.

The room went silent again.

"I love her," he said. "Can't you explain that to Joey? We won't cause nobody any trouble, explain that to him, okay? We'll be going to Hawaii. We won't bother nobody, I promise you. I love her, Uncle Frank."

He took my hands again.

"Explain that to him, okay?"

There were tears in his eyes. Blue like his mother's. Like my sister's, may she rest in peace.

"Uncle Frank?" he said. "Explain it to him, will you?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll explain it to him."

"I love her, Uncle Frank."

"I see that. Let me talk to him."

"Thanks, Uncle Frank."

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I got up out of the easy chair. I held my nephew close and kissed him on the cheek. I walked him to the door, and as he went out into the hall, I said, "Enjoy Hawaii, huh?"

"Thanks. I'll send you a card."

I closed the door behind him. I could hear his footsteps going down the steps in the hall. I heard the door to the street opening and closing. I went to the window and looked down into the street. I watched Danny until he turned the corner and was out of sight.

Then I went to the phone, picked up the receiver, and dialed Joey's number by heart.

"Hello?" he said.

"It's me," I said.

"So?" he said.

"He just left."

"And?"

"He won't listen."

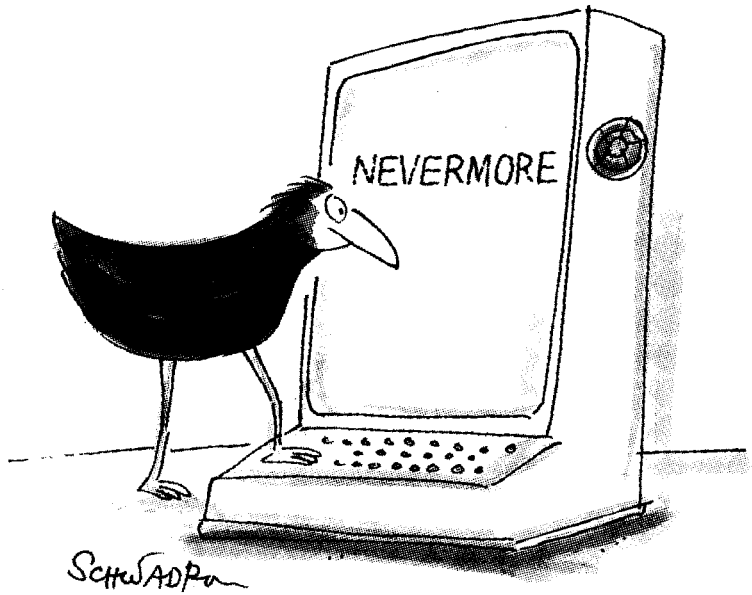
There was a long silence on the line.

Then Joey said, "That's too bad."

And hung up.

I held the receiver for a minute or so, listening to the vacant hum of the dial tone.

Then I replaced it gently on the cradle. ●



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Body Falling Through Space

by Laura Wilson

"That's Beryl Van Dine, isn't it?"

I'm surprised to hear my mother say this. I've painted Mrs. Van Dine many times over the years, but this is the first time she's picked up on it.

You can't tell from the picture if it's a man or a woman—I suppose you might guess from the clothing, although that's only an impression. It's just a body falling through the air. I was trying to paint the movement, to capture the speed and density of the plummeting body. The catalogue describes it as exhilarating—which is true, in a way—after all, Mrs. Van Dine jumped because she wanted to.

Though her first fiction appeared only four years ago, Laura Wilson has already become someone to watch on the British crime scene. The *London Times* called her debut novel "exciting." It, like her subsequent two books, delves into the recent past. An editor and an author of history books for children, Ms. Wilson has a special interest in recent history. For a review of her latest novel, *My Best Friend,* see page 15 (The Jury Box).

She'd been a neighbour. Not close, but they'd come to our house occasionally, and I'd looked forward to it because we didn't have many visitors. It was only Mum and I—my father died when I was a baby. Mrs. Van Dine was quiet and neat. She brought her slippers and apron with her and helped Mum with the washing-up. It was Mr. Van Dine I wanted to see, because he made me laugh. She was unremarkable, except for the way she died.

I thought Mum had forgotten her. She's ninety and she's become vague in the past couple of years—I don't think she remembers very much about anything. When I've brought her to my shows in the past, she's pottered round saying, "What's *that* when it's at

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home?" and turning away before I can explain. Not that the explanation would be worth much—I mean, if I could *say* it, I wouldn't have to paint it, would I?

Mum leans forward to read the title on the card—"Body Falling Through Space"—then shakes her head and shuffles on to the next picture.

I've made a whole sequence of Mrs. Van Dine, but this one's the closest I've come to achieving what I wanted. It's the moment just after she hit the road, and there's an accidental symmetry to it that I only discovered when I'd finished: the flutter of red curtain in the upper right-hand corner and the fleshy, wet mouth in the lower left of the picture. The colour is perfect—the only time, I think, that I've managed this.

The body is less satisfactory—nearly there, but not quite. I tried to get the effect of the torso facing one way and the legs facing the other, but it hasn't quite worked. I even bought a mannequin from a shop and pulled it apart and rearranged it, but it was too hard, too plastic. I wanted the burst quality of the flesh—not literally, but the way in which the skin had become a slack bag with everything inside broken from the impact, the way the flabby upper arms puddled on the hard grey road, the way the nylon nightie was twisted across the thighs and the varicose veins ran down the soft legs like hard rivers, and the contrast of the puffy, naked foot with the grainy edge of the pavement. . . .

Mrs. Van Dine is the reason I became an artist. I'd always loved drawing and painting, but it was only when I saw her fall that I realised I wanted to spend my life doing it. I was ten and on my way to school. I walked to the end of my street, turned the corner, and Beryl Van Dine plummeted down in front of me and landed about fifty yards away, in the road. I don't remember the sound she made, which is odd, but I do remember that for a moment, nothing happened, and then the doors of the terraced houses opposite all flew open at once like the start of a horse race, and the bus queue broke apart and rushed towards her, and soon she was ringed with people and I couldn't see her properly anymore. A car stopped and a man got out to look, and then somebody shouted for an ambulance and people were dashing back to their homes to telephone. . . .

A woman took my hand and led me past. "She's dead," I said, "isn't she?" I leant over to look, but the woman tugged me away. "Never mind, dear," she said, "the doctor's on his way."

"But she's dead!"

"No, dear, I'm sure she's not. . . . You mustn't worry." She smiled at me. "Don't want you late for school, do we?"

A bus came, driving down the middle of the road to avoid the knot of people round Mrs. Van Dine. "What's your name?" the woman asked me.

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"Leanne."

She handed me onto the platform. "This is Leanne," she said to the conductor. "She's had a bit of a shock. Nasty accident." She jerked her head back towards the crowd in the road. "You'll see she gets to school all right, won't you?"

"No problem." The conductor looked solemn. "Was it a car?"

The woman shook her head. "She came down from the window." She made it sound as if Mrs. Van Dine had jumped from the fourth floor because she didn't feel like using the stairs.

The conductor said, "I'll make sure she's all right," then he told me to go and sit down, and rang the bell.

I ran upstairs and looked through the back window of the bus, but all I could see was people's backs. Despite what the woman had said, I was certain that Mrs. Van Dine was dead. There'd been something about her body—the lumpenness of it—that made me sure. I don't remember feeling at all upset, more as if I'd just broken out of myself. It felt like the beginning of something—well, it was, me becoming an artist. I didn't make the mistake of trying to tell anyone—I knew they'd think I was callous—and anyway, it was pointless because I could only express what I'd seen in paint, not in words.

Mrs. Van Dine was pretty lucky to die, because it wasn't a very high window she fell out of—the top floor of one of those tall Victorian townhouses. She could have been injured or crippled, but she must have landed well—or badly, I suppose, depending how you look at it—because the impact killed her. I've always been grateful to her—not that she did it for me, she did it for herself, but nevertheless . . . She was my first big sale to a major collector, as well.

"That's not very nice," says my mother.

"What isn't?"

"Showing her like that, all uncovered."

"That's how she was."

"It's not right." She peers at the picture again. "She hasn't got her top set."

"She didn't have them in." I'd thought about that when I started painting her, because Mrs. Van Dine hadn't seemed like the sort of woman who'd commit suicide without her teeth in, and I hadn't seen them on the ground anywhere nearby. I'd wondered if they'd somehow been ejected from her mouth on the way down and become snagged in a tree or landed on someone's basement steps, but it hadn't really concerned me. In any case, the mouth looked more convincing—*truer*—without them.

"I saw her fall, remember?"

"Fall?"

"Yes, from the window. I was on my way to school."

My mother turns back to the painting. "And that's all wrong,

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that red bit at the top. Those curtains were blue."

"Red," I say, patiently. I'd seen them out of the corner of my eye—a red streak at the top of my vision, there and gone—before the people started to close in on the body.

"They were blue."

I sigh. "If you say so."

"She showed me," insists my mother. "Lovely blue, they were . . . I thought they'd go well in your room, but they were too dear, and I . . . I . . ." She falters and stops, and I see tears in her eyes.

"Mum . . . It doesn't matter . . ." I say. "I liked my curtains."

"Yes, it does," she says, loudly. "It *does* matter." Then she looks at me in surprise. "Not your curtains, *hers*. It's not right."

"It balances the picture, that's all," I reply, gently. "Come on, let's look at something else." I take her arm, but she doesn't move. The tears are coming faster now, and a few people turn round to look at us.

"It's not right," she sobs. "It just isn't . . . *right.*"

"Look, let's wipe your face." I get a tissue out of my pocket and glance round for a waitress. "Let's get you some orange juice, shall we? Then we can go and—"

"I don't want any orange juice!"

"All right . . . do you want to sit down?"

"No!"

I look round the room. She seems so out of place, an old lady bundled up in the coat and scarf she'd refused to take off, weeping in this big white space full of critics and journalists and collectors. . . . I wonder if I can get someone to take her home.

"He died," she says, suddenly.

"Who did?"

"Frank Van Dine. He died."

"Did he?"

"Last year, it was. He should have waited."

"Waited?"

"For her to get dressed."

"What are you saying, Mum?" I ask, impatiently. There are people hovering, wanting to talk to me. She's getting too old for this, I think. I shan't bring her again. "Waited for who to get dressed?"

"Beryl. And her teeth . . . it wasn't *nice.*"

I look at her in astonishment.

"The curtains were blue," she says. "I saw them."

I stare at the red flash in the corner of the picture and screw up my eyes, trying to remember exactly what I'd seen. I'd thought it was the edge of a curtain, but I'd only looked for a second. . . . It was definitely red, not blue, but it was material. Heavy, like curtains . . . but what? Clothing? A dressing gown?

"She was afraid of him," my mother says. "She told me."

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I think of Mr. Van Dine tickling me and calling me "Tiddler." How could anyone be *afraid* of him?

My mother puts her hand on my arm. "He hit her," she whispers. "Knocked her about."

"He didn't . . . did he?"

"Oh yes. He drank, you see, and she was so frightened."

"Did she tell anyone else?"

"Oh *no.*" Mum looks shocked. "It's not the sort of thing you'd tell people, is it?"

"She could have gone to the police."

"I don't think so, dear. Not in those days."

I stare at my painting of the falling body, trying to dismantle my memory of that day, take it to pieces and make it mean something else . . . the downward blur of the speeding shape hadn't captured the violence of the argument that preceded the push, the shove that toppled her over the edge of the sill into space, the pure terror of the dive and the instant realisation that she would slam into the tarmac and that her husband—the big, solid lie that was Mr. Van Dine, with his bonhomie and his square red face, his jokes and hearty laughing—that he had done this.

I hadn't captured it because I hadn't seen it. I hadn't seen what was there at all.

I turn back to my mother. She isn't crying anymore. Her face is gentle, understanding. "Oh dear," she says, sympathetically. "Your pictures. Now they won't make sense, will they?" She glances furtively round the room. "All these people . . . will you have to give the money back?"

As I consider this, I'm aware of people jostling behind me, phrases detaching themselves from the hum of noise in the room—"Packs a punch, seeing them all together like this . . . reminds one of Bacon, rather . . . of course, one likes them for all the wrong reasons . . ."

"No," I say. "I don't think so. They didn't know Mrs. Van Dine, did they? I've never told them about her."

My mother nods approvingly and starts making her way across to the next wall. "Much better not to. It wasn't very nice. Poor Beryl . . . Now then. What's that one when it's at home?"

And I think, I've understood nothing. Nothing at all. ●

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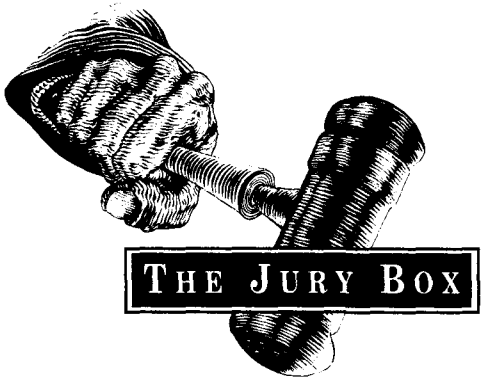

by Jon L. Breen

Martin Cruz Smith is a master of the "high concept" whose continuing theme has been the interface and conflict of differing cultures, whether national, ethnic, religious, or philosophical. His first novel, before he added the middle name to his byline, was an alternate universe speculation called *The Indians Won* (1970). His Edgar-nominated mystery debut, *Gypsy in Amber* (1971), was the first of two novels featuring an American Gypsy as detective. Under the pseudonym Simon Quinn, he wrote six paperbacks (1974-75) about a Vatican Intelligence officer known as the Inquisitor. His bestselling breakthrough book *Gorky Park* (1981) was the first of a series concerning Russian police detective Arkady Renko, while *Stallion Gate* (1986) assigns a Pueblo Indian army sergeant as security man for Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos. Smith's cultural concerns, his mastery of well-integrated research, and his irresistible narrative drive are all on display in his latest novel.

**** Martin Cruz Smith: *December 6,* Simon & Schuster, $26. The son of American missionaries, Harry Niles has spent most of his life in Japan, most recently as a representative of Hollywood film companies in Tokyo. Now, with war imminent in the last month of 1941, his dilemma is how, when, and whether he should get out of the country. The characters are vividly realized, the twists and turns of the plot unpredictable, the prose and dialogue expert, but the best feature is the detailed and often surprising picture of Japan on the verge of war from the viewpoint of a culturally conflicted protagonist. Appropriate both to Niles's movie connection and his nightclub sideline, the novel may occasionally remind you of *Casablanca.*

**** Laura Wilson: *My Best Friend,* Delacorte, $22.95. The author's ability to shift among multiple viewpoints and time

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frames while keeping the reader guessing is evident once again in her third novel, the story of a World War II era murder of a teenage girl and a 1995 child-in-jeopardy situation. The three narrators are Gerald Haldane, now nearing retirement, first met via the diary he began as an eight-year-old in the war-threatened Britain of 1938; his coworker Jo, who gave birth at 17 to her now-12-year-old daughter; and his aunt Tilly, an 87-year-old retired actress and bearer of secrets. A key figure in the plot is Gerald's mother, unsuccessful as a parent but famous as a writer of juvenile mystery/adventure fiction—some sample pages from her work are right on target. (Published in hardcover early in 2002, the book is now also available in paperback [Dell, $6.99].)

*** Andrew Vachss: *The Getaway Man,* Vintage/Random, $11. In cover art, spare style, and economical word count, this trade paperback evokes the hard and tough crime novels of the Gold Medal era transported to a contemporary setting. Narrator Eddie is a somewhat simple but proudly professional career criminal whose obsession is cars: repairing them, stealing them, delivering contraband in them, watching old movies about them, and, best of all, driving them in getaways. Following his protagonist through crimes, trials, prison stays, and encounters with femmes fatale to One Last Big Job and a couple of neat finishing twists, Vachss keeps the reader in a vise-like grip.

*** John Mortimer: *Rumpole Rests His Case,* Viking, $24.95. In seven new cases, the magnificent Rumpole of the Bailey returns to do battle with opposing barristers, unfriendly judges, chambers anti-smoking crusaders, She Who Must Be Obeyed, and (in the alarming title story) his own mortality. These aren't the best Rumpole stories — newcomers should check out the earlier collections first—but a bonanza for fans, who will be glad to know the hinted-at end of Rumpole is finally no more definitive than those in *Rumple and the Golden Thread* (1983) or *Rumpole's Last Case* (1987).

The Mysterious North (Signet, $6.99), an Alaskan-themed original anthology edited by Dana Stabenow, includes strong contributions from both residents and visitors. Of the home team, editor Stabenow presents a story of the Klondike Gold Rush, Sue Henry an account of an inept criminal's career, and John Straley a bittersweet tale in poetry form. One of the best entries, *Anchorage Daily News* columnist Mike Doogan's "War Can Me Murder," finds a believable Dashiell Hammett, in transit from his army assignment in the Aleutians, motivated by business concerns to solve a brothel murder. Among the non-Alaskans in good form are Anne Perry, with "Rearrangements," a non-criminous tale of sibling relationships

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under stress, and Donna Andrews, with the somewhat mystical "An Unkindness of Ravens."

Short-story lovers will find several other original anthologies agreeable. Playful Shakespearean tales by Simon Brett, Robert Barnard, and others, including Edward D. Hoch with a new story about Cleopatra, are offered in *Much Ado About Murder* (Berkley, $23.95), edited by Anne Perry. Hoch has two new stories (one about Father Noone and another as by Stephen Dentinger) in the anthology *Murder Most Catholic* (Cumberland, $14.95), edited by Ralph McInerny, who also appears twice, as himself and Monica Quill. A collection that manages to do without Hoch (and all of his gender) is *Tart Noir* (Berkley, $13), edited by Stella Duffy and Lauren Henderson, accurately blurbed as "edgy, sexy, and shocking." Some stories (such as those by Chris Niles, Karen Moline, and Sparkle Hayter) are notable for their humor, while others (like the Dagger Award-winning contribution of editor Duffy) are very grim and downbeat indeed. Longtime specialist publisher Dennis McMillan celebrates his twentieth anniversary with an impressive and, I think, all male roster of contributors to *Measures of Poison* ($35), including George P. Pelecanos, James Crumley, Bill Pronzini, Michael Connelly, James Sallis, and (with previously unpublished pieces) departed masters Charles Willeford and Howard Browne.

Fans and collectors of vintage radio comedy and drama offer new adventures of their favorite characters in *It's That Time Again: The New Stories of Old-Time Radio* (BearManor Media, $15), edited by Ben Ohmart. Only about half the programs represented are criminous, and many are more successful as nostalgia than fiction, but the enthusiasm of the writers and their respect for the period is infectious. I especially enjoyed Patrick W. Picciarelli's new case for insurance investigator Johnny Dollar and the framing device of Christopher Conlon's *Inner Sanctum* entry. Some relatively obscure shows are included, such as the pioneering female private-eye program *Candy Matson, Yukon 2-8209,* a San Francisco-based program aired between 1949 and 1951.

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE BLIND PIG

by Doug Allyn

Shirley felt the music the moment she stepped out of her car. Hard rap. Rock-solid bass thumping up through the concrete like a heartbeat, the dark soul of the city.

Uneasy, she looked around for the source. No cars were passing. Six A.M. The Detroit streets were as deserted as the back of the moon at this hour. Yet she could feel that beat. Savage lyrics echoing angrily across the empty parking lot. Unintelligible. Menacing as a muttered curse.

The sound seemed to be coming from the alley. Maybe the music was a summer prank. Some clown with a boom box having fun with the new girl her first day on the job. Maybe that was it.

Or maybe not. It didn't matter. Squaring her shoulders, Shirley strode briskly to the back of the warehouse, took a quick peek around the corner, then edged into the alley.

The drumbeat was louder back here, resounding off the brick walls like the soundtrack to a horror movie. Shirley found the back door with no trouble. But as she inserted her passkey, a black man stepped from the shadows across the alley.

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A giant. Big as Shaquille O'Neal. Powerfully built, with a shaved head, black leather trenchcoat. Mirrored sunglasses, like the eyes of an insect. Alien.

She almost fled. Somehow didn't. Fought down her panic instead. He wasn't threatening her. Wasn't even looking at her. He was just . . . standing there in the shadows. Minding his own business. In a dark Motown alley at six A.M.

Jamming the key into the unfamiliar lock, she popped the deadbolt, ducked inside, and quickly tapped out the keypad code that disarmed the alarm. But as she closed the freight door she risked a final peek.

"Allyn . . . is part of a strong Detroit presence in crime writing," writes Marv Lachman in *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*. ". . . one of the murder capitals of the U.S., Detroit is an ethnic mixture, and Allyn accurately limns its many groups, including African Americans, Hispanics, whites from the South . . ." It's that complex and sometimes volatile ethnic mix that gives rise to conflict in this story. For more on the author, see page 77.

He was still standing there, patient as a tree. Sensing her eyes, he glanced toward her. And nodded politely. She slammed the steel door, locked it, and snapped on the safety chain.

The drumbeat from the alley was barely audible now, echoing hollowly around the empty freight room, cheerless as a prison yard. Hurrying through it, Shirley unlocked the inner door, stepped in, and hit the light switch. Overhead, the fluorescent tubes flickered fitfully into life.

With her back against the door, Shirley took a deep, unsteady breath and looked around. Everything seemed shipshape. The white tile floors were properly scrubbed, the sorting cases dusted. The U.S. Post Office, Metro Detroit, Cass Corridor Substation, was ready for business.

Well, almost. The cleaning crew had done their chores. Time for Shirley to do hers.

Moving briskly to work off her jitters, she tossed her jacket and purse in her locker and unlocked the lobby doors to give customers access to their P.O. boxes. Then she carried a hamper out to the drop box to fetch the overnight mail.

She was lugging the loaded hamper back to the workroom when a *bang!* from the freight door gave her a start. Instantly, she thought of King Kong lurking out in the alley.

It wasn't the giant, though. Only a delivery driver making the first mail drop of the day. The driver rapped on the inner door when he finished unloading, probably hoping for an invitation to the coffee room.

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At her old station she would have let him in, but this was her first week on the job. She didn't know the drivers or anyone else, and the postal regulations restricted truckers to the loading docks.

A pity. She wouldn't have minded a little company. But as a newly promoted supervisor, she couldn't afford to stretch any rules.

Instead, she ducked into her cubbyhole of an office to check her messages. A postal-jeep driver and a street deliveryman had reported in sick. She rang up replacements for them, then began drawing up the worksheets for the day.

At seven, the first-shift clerks arrived. A few said good morning as they passed her office. Most didn't. As a new boss and an outsider, she definitely wasn't one of the gang yet. Perhaps she wouldn't be. Ever. Sometimes it worked out that way.

She was too busy to chat anyway. Part of her duties included allocating the bulk mail and she wasn't familiar with the routes—

Someone rapped sharply on the doorjamb. Verna Tatum, one of the clerks, stuck her head in. "Miz Mullaney? Someone to see you."

"Who is it?"

"Didn't say. And is it Miss Mullaney, or Missus?" Fortyish and straight out of 'Billytown in Ecorse Township, Verna had orange hair and a Tennessee accent thick as molasses. Verna was also an office magpie. For postal clerks, the sorting room is an eternal talk show where gossip is elevated to an art form.

"I used to be Mrs., now it's Miss. My mother said she might drop by. Ask her to—"

"Oh, this definitely isn't your mom," Verna said, mischief dancing in her eyes. "I asked him to wait in the lobby."

Verna waited for Shirley to ask the obvious question. No chance.

"Thank you, Verna, that'll be all," Shirley said, marching out to the lobby. She couldn't imagine who—

It was the man from the alley. No mistaking him. Up close, he wasn't quite as tall as she'd thought. Only six foot three or four. Maybe five. And still wearing the sunglasses. And an incongruous red bow tie.

"Ah, my lady of the morning." He nodded. "Miss Mullaney, is it? My name is Raheem Mohammed. We passed like ships in the night, in the alley. I came to say hello, and to apologize."

"For what?"

"I think I may have startled you. I wasn't expecting anyone so early. If I gave you a fright, sorry about that." He offered her a hand the size of a catcher's mitt.

"You did surprise me a little," Shirley admitted, accepting his handshake. "What were you doing back there?"

"Working," Raheem said. His voice was a deep bass, smooth as black velvet. "I handle security for the business across the alley."

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"What business?"

"It's a nightclub. An after-hours club called The Exotica."

"I heard the music, it was kind of hard to miss. But I thought nightclubs always closed at two."

"Technically, they're supposed to," Raheem conceded. "But some folks aren't done partying at two. They're better off in a place like ours than out roaming the streets."

"Really? And what do the police think about that?"

"As long as things stay peaceful, they let us alone. And it's my job to keep things peaceful. That's another reason I came. To avoid any misunderstandings."

"Oh, I think I understand well enough," Shirley said. "You're running a blind pig across the alley and you're hoping I won't file a complaint about it."

"Blind pig?" Raheem echoed, smiling. A good smile. "That's a term you don't hear very often nowadays. You're not from Detroit, are you, Miss Mullaney?"

"No. I just transferred to this office."

"Then let me welcome you to the Motor City, alias Motown. It's a much nicer place than its reputation. I hope you like it. As far as our . . . 'blind pig' is concerned, I give you my word we won't cause any problems for you. I'll be in the alley every morning to make sure no one from the club or anywhere else bothers you. What do you say, Miss Mullaney? Live and let live?"

"And if I choose not to go along?"

"If you file a complaint, the police will probably close us down. I hope you won't do that. A lot of people would lose their jobs, myself included. And then I wouldn't be in the alley to protect you anymore."

"That almost sounds like a threat."

"No, ma'am, it's truly not. I'm just explaining the way of the world. My world. And I'd be very foolish to threaten you now. You know my name, where I work, and everyone here knows what I look like. They've all been checking us out, by the way, taking turns walking by the window."

"Probably curious. As I said, I'm new here."

"Then let me offer some friendly advice. Motown's got some mean streets. You'll be much safer with me around. To paraphrase Rodney King, why don't we just . . . get along?"

Shirley stared up at him, reading his face. And realized why he was wearing the sunglasses. His left eye was scarred, the eyebrow seamed by a savage gash. He should have been terrifying. But somehow it only made him seem more human. He was big and fierce and definitely intimidating. But he'd been wounded, too. He could bleed.

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Which gave them something in common. Shirley's scars weren't as visible, but they were just as real.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Raheem Muhammed."

"All right, Mr. Muhammed, we'll live and let live. For now. Until the very first time I have a problem."

"Then I'll make sure your mornings are trouble free. Thanks for your time. It's been nice meeting you, Miss Mullaney. I'll see you tomorrow, then. And welcome to Detroit."

Most of the staff glanced away when Shirley reentered the sorting room, trying to look busy, as though they hadn't been listening. Verna trailed her back to her office.

"Who on earth was that fella?" she asked.

"His name's Raheem Muhammed," Shirley said, sliding behind her computer, switching out of screen saver. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason," Verna said hastily. "It's just that he's very . . . tall."

"*He certainly is. Was there anything else?*"

The rumors ricocheted around the sorting room like Roman candles. Shirley knew better than to deny or try to explain anything. It would only add fuel to the fire.

But when she took her midmorning break, she heard someone mention her name in the coffee room as she approached. She paused outside the door, listening.

"That little freckle-faced sister can't be as straight as she looks," a woman's voice said. "Did you check out her boyfriend?"

"That big fella is Miz Mullaney's boyfriend? You sure?"

"Gospel truth. I hear they serious, too. Girl wasn't here two hours when he showed up to make nice."

"A skinny white chick with a brown-eye, treetop lover? Ain't no justice. How does she rate?"

"Must be a wild child in the rack," the speaker chuckled. "The quiet ones will fool you every time."

"Hi," Shirley said, breezing in. "Coffee hot?"

"Hot and black. My favorite." Two heavyset older women were at the break table, one black, one Latino. And not a bit embarrassed to be caught gossiping. Eyeing her with shameless curiosity instead. "You're the new super, right? Miz Mullaney?"

"Call me Shirley. Mind if I join you?"

"Set yourself down, girl," the black woman smiled. "I'm Arleta Tubbs, this is Lupe Gomes. I work the front counter, Lupe pounds a route. Where'd you transfer in from?"

Shirley told them, but not much more. Kept the conversation general. Strictly shoptalk. Let them know she knew the job, learned it from the street up, liked the work, took it seriously. That

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she was friendly, fair, but nobody's doormat. Trying to make her first impression a good one.

And it worked. Her new coworkers loosened up, sharing pictures of their kids, even daring to dis the branch manager a little. "Tuttle's an okay boss. Plays lots of golf and ain't big on getting his hands dirty, but he surely does like to chew on folks who screw up." After a few minutes of friendly fencing, Arleta cut right to it, asking about Shirley's tall, dark, handsome visitor.

"Raheem?" Shirley echoed innocently. "Not much to tell, really. I haven't known him long."

"For true? I heard you two were serious," Arleta pressed.

"It's too soon to say." Shirley smiled. "Gotta go."

Back in her office, she smiled at her own foolishness. After her marriage crashed, the staff at her last job had treated her like an emotional invalid for months. Made her feel like she was walking around with "Poor Shirley" tattooed on her forehead.

This was a new job, a new beginning. She could have denied the rumor. But it was a nice change to have a love life worth gossiping about. Even if it was only imaginary.

The reality of her life remained totally tame. Raheem was at the far end of the alley every morning, standing in the shadows. Never spoke, never approached. But he always nodded politely. And sometimes he smiled. The smile made him seem a little less dangerous. But not much.

The following Tuesday it was raining so hard the drumming on Shirley's umbrella nearly drowned out the rap rhythm from the blind pig. Raheem was standing at his post, hatless, soaked to the bone. And he still managed a nod and a rueful smile.

Sheltered in the doorway, she hesitated. "Raheem?"

He trotted over, hunched against the rain. "Yes?"

She offered him her umbrella. He hesitated, then accepted gratefully. And that was it. They both went back to work.

But when Raheem returned the umbrella a few hours later, the rumors about the two of them were etched in stone. The cute little super had a brown-eyed boyfriend the size of a building.

Shirley let it ride. In some ways, her imaginary affair was an improvement over her marriage. No fights, no friction, no infidelity. No sex, either, but you can't have everything. And being the object of gossip gave her spirits a lift. Her own private joke.

She found herself primping a little more in the morning, choosing her clothes with more care, wearing earrings, light lipstick, low heels instead of loafers. After all, she had a reputation to maintain.

Her new coworkers weren't aware of the change. They assumed she always dressed well. At her old job, she'd been treated like one

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of the guys. Not here. Women accepted her as a lady and the men showed equal respect.

A few male coworkers even came on to her. *Very* politely. By now everyone had heard the rumors about Shirley's treetop lover. How serious were they about each other? Nobody was really sure. And they didn't want to find out the hard way.

Shirley didn't mind. Busy with a new job in a new town, reassembling a new life from the shattered pieces of her past, the last thing she needed was a new man in her life.

So naturally, she got one.

Detroit is one of the few big towns that still has beat cops. During the dark Murder City days, Mayor Young noted the city streets were safer when patrolmen actually walked through the neighborhoods rather than driving by.

Postal rules bar non-employees from the coffee room, but the local cops were welcome. Patrolmen regularly took breaks there, especially during bad weather, joshing with the postmen, donating donuts, trading tips on street crime and surly dogs.

A young patrol sergeant, Pete DeVries, took an instant interest in Shirley. Tall, blond, and buff from basketball and free-weight workouts, DeVries was considered a major-league catch around the mailroom. A dreamboat.

Pete had dated a few women from the office. Nothing serious. He was always polite, but it was strictly wham, bam, thank you ma'am. No promises, no commitments. No second dates.

He usually stayed aloof from the break-room banter. But he noticed Shirley. And before long he arranged his breaks to coincide with hers.

He didn't come on too strong, didn't hold her chair or change his seat to be near her, but he smiled occasionally, went out of his way to include her in the conversation, and even fetched her coffee. Once.

Shirley was aware of Pete's interest, of course. So was the gossip guild: Verna, Arleta, and every other postal worker in the substation. No one was surprised when DeVries asked Shirley out. He wasn't the first. She'd had several previous offers, always said no. Not this time.

Shirley even surprised herself a little. But she'd been on her new job three weeks. She was dressing better, looking better, and her confidence in herself was growing. Maybe it was time to step out. Take a chance on love or something like it. DeVries was certainly attractive and seemed nice enough. A bit of a stiff, perhaps, but he seemed like a perfect gentleman.

And he was. A gentleman with a shiny new Corvette, in fact. Bright red. Very dramatic, if not very practical. Shirley expected Pete to babble a lot of macho drivel about his car. He barely men-

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tioned it. Their first date was equally low-key. Dinner and a movie. Coffee and shoptalk afterward. He didn't even try to kiss her goodnight.

On their second date, he did kiss her. Politely. No tongue, no groping. No fireworks, either. Which surprised her. Pete was practically male-model handsome, trim and taut, a hard bod, great smile. A catch by anyone's standards.

Shirley's ex-husband was a musician, a scruffy, charming cheat who'd dumped her for a pea-brained barmaid. But all through the roller coaster of their rocky marriage, their chemistry never quit. Electric sex, long after the love had died.

Shirley'd been out of the dating game for so long she'd forgotten what a fizzless kiss felt like. Flat as day-old champagne. But if Pete noticed the lack, he didn't show it. Seemed quite pleased with himself, in fact. And promptly asked her for a third date.

She almost said no. Pete hadn't been shy about dumping other girls he'd dated. But he'd always been polite to Shirley. A pleasant change from her moody ex. So, against her better judgment, she agreed.

And that was a mistake.

They were dining in The Olive Garden in Dearborn, a family restaurant, Italian food mild enough for the Midwest. Shirley was toying with her linguini, wishing she were home watching a *Gilligan's Island* rerun. Anywhere but here.

"There's something we need to talk about," Pete said.

"Is something wrong?" And here it comes, she thought, brightening. A polite brush-off. She wondered if she should pretend to be disappointed or just concede her relief.

"I know you've been seeing someone else," Pete said, leaning forward, lowering his voice. "I'm not the jealous type, you understand. Never had cause to be. It's your reputation I'm concerned about."

"My—reputation?" Baffled, Shirley tried to recalibrate her brain.

"Absolutely. Look, don't misunderstand. Personally, I haven't got a prejudiced bone in my body. Ask anybody. The way I see it, if people want to date across racial lines, it's their business. But not everybody's as open-minded as I am, you know?"

"Pete, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Come on, you know exactly what I mean. Raheem Muhammed. Look, I'm not trying to embarrass you. I've known about him all along. I'll admit I was surprised at first, you seem like such a nice kid, but after I did a little investigating it made sense. Small-town girl, new divorce, new in the city. This Raheem comes on to you, you try to be polite, he makes more of it than it is. Now you don't know how to get rid of him. Is that how it is?"

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"You . . . investigated me?" she managed.

"Hey, sometimes being a cop comes in handy." He smiled. "No big deal, I check out all the chicks I date. The singles game can get pretty brutal, you know? You don't have to worry, though, you passed with flying colors. Good family, solid credit rating, no health problems, not even any traffic tickets. Muhammed, though, he's something else again. He's an ex-convict. A mugger. Street fighter. Did hard time in Jackson for aggravated assault, turned Muslim in prison. Did he mention that?"

She didn't answer. Couldn't. She shook her head.

"I didn't think so. Got out of the joint four years ago, no arrests since. His parole officer claims he's straight now, if you call working security for an after-hours dive straight. What did he tell you? That he's a heart surgeon?"

"No," she said evenly, trying to keep her voice down to avoid a scene. "He told me he was a bouncer in a blind pig."

"Really? And you dated him anyway? That's not very smart, Shirley. I'm disappointed."

"That makes two of us."

He glanced up, surprised at the edge in her tone. "Anyway, now that you and I are seeing each other, you're gonna have to cut him loose. It reflects bad on me, you seeing some black guy at the same time you're going out with me. Especially a damn convict. But it looks even worse for you. Gossip can get pretty brutal in a situation like this."

"Believe me, I'm well aware of that."

"So, it's all settled. You'll break it off with him."

"No. I don't think so."

"*Look, if you're afraid of him, Shirley, you don't have to worry* about that. I roust people like him for a living. He may be big, but he's not bulletproof. I'll take care of him for you. Hell, if I work it right, I can probably put him back inside for a while."

"You mean . . . you'd send him to jail? For dating me? You'd actually do that?"

"Why not? Wouldn't be a new experience for him and it would make things simpler for us. Hell, I can take him out of the picture permanently if you want. Just say the word."

She shook her head slowly. "No. That's not what I want. What I want is for you to call for the check. Which I will pay. Dinner's on me tonight."

"Hey, you don't have to do that. Handling this Raheem is no big thing. You can pay me back on our next date, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't think so. No favors. Because after tonight, I won't be seeing you again, *Officer* DeVries, and I don't want to owe you anything at all. Not even a dinner."

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"Whoa up, what's with the attitude?"

"My attitude?" she echoed, flushing dangerously, leaning across the table. "Two crummy dates and you think you've got the right to run my life? Check my credit rating? And threaten to send a man to jail just because of some lousy gossip?"

"I'm doing it for your own good!"

"The hell you are! You're doing it just because you can, you son of a bitch!"

"Keep your voice down!"

"Why? If you're still worrying about my reputation, don't bother. It's not your problem anymore."

"You're throwing me over for that spade? I can't believe it."

"Believe what you like, DeVries. But from now on, stay out of my life and out of my way."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. You're new in town, Mullaney, new on the job. What will your boss say if I tell him his new manager is bangin' a black ex-convict?"

"I don't know! What will your chief say if he finds out you let a blind pig operate on your beat? Maybe he'll wonder how a street cop can afford a new Corvette!"

They were both standing now, faces inches apart, eyes locked in a death-ray glare. And realized the restaurant had fallen silent. Everyone was staring. Their waiter hovered a few tables away, afraid to approach. Slowly, Shirley eased back down into her seat. After warning off the waiter with a glare, Pete did, too.

"Look, I don't want trouble over this, Pete," she said, lowering her voice to a hiss. "We had a couple of dates, things didn't work out, no harm done, right? Why don't we both just . . . move on?"

"You don't get it. People talk. If you dump me, everybody will think you chose super-spade over me. I'll be a freakin' joke on the job."

"It doesn't have to be that way. All this gossip about me and Raheem is—"

"Over!" he snapped, cutting her off. "I'll take care of Raheem, don't you worry. A mugger's been roughing up tourists in Pioneer Park. From the descriptions we've been getting, sounds like your boyfriend's gone back to his wicked ways."

"What descriptions?"

"Black guy. Some folks claim he's pretty big. Definitely sounds like your pal to me."

"And a million other men in this town. You're trying to frame him."

"No need to," Pete said. "He's an ex-convict. He'll revert. They always do. Muhammed walks through the park every day on his way home from work. I figured we'd nail him sooner or later. Now it's going to be sooner—"

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He never finished. Grabbing her purse, Shirley rose to leave, hesitated, then dumped her half-eaten linguini on Pete's head. She thrust fifty dollars at the dumbfounded waiter as she stormed out.

After a moment of stunned silence, the entire restaurant burst into laughter and applause. A better show than HBO.

Arriving at work early the next morning, Shirley hurried into the alley. Raheem was standing his post, swaying to the rap beat coming from below. She called his name and he glanced up, surprised.

"We need to talk," she said. "I'm afraid I've gotten you into terrible trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I've been dating a police officer, Pete DeVries. Because of the gossip, he thinks you and I are . . . involved with each other. He may try to make trouble for you because of it."

"DeVries is jealous of me? For what? Talking to you?" His bass chuckle rumbled like a V-8 engine warming up.

"Raheem, this is serious! There have been some muggings in Pioneer Park. DeVries thinks he can pin them on you."

His chuckle died. "Muggings?" He looked away a moment. "And you think I might be involved? Is that why you're telling me about this?"

"Of course not. I know you wouldn't do anything like that."

"No? Why not? I used to rob people for a living, you know. And it paid a lot better than guarding alleys. If I'm going to get busted for it anyway, maybe I should go back to it."

"I don't understand."

"That's right, you don't. You don't really know anything about me or my life, Miss Mullaney. Not even my face." He removed his sunglasses, revealing the savage scar that puckered his left eyebrow and the clouded, milk-glass pupil below it.

"I noticed your eye the first day," Shirley said. "It didn't scare me then, it doesn't now. Why are you treating me like this?"

"Because I'm angry! I have a right to be. I talk to you a few times and your boyfriend wants to send me back to prison?"

"He's not my boyfriend, Raheem. Believe me, I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I know it's not fair!"

"And you think life is fair?"

"No, but—"

He raised his hand, waving off her protests. "I know, I know, I just . . . Look, it's all right, I know it's not your fault. Or mine. Or even that cop's. I swear sometimes Allah gets bored in his paradise and makes a game of our lives."

"God isn't playing with your life, Pete DeVries is."

"Or maybe God is playing with DeVries," he said, his smile returning. "It doesn't matter. Whatever happens was written

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before we were born. It's kismet. Our fate. It's not our place to change it."

"But you don't have to help it along! At least stay out of the park for a few days."

"It's not that simple. Guys like DeVries have been pushing me around my whole life. For eight years in Jackson, cops told me when to eat, to sleep, when to talk, and what to say. I'm free now, paid up. What's the point of being a free man if I can't go where I please? And I walk through that park every day."

"My God, you're as crazy as DeVries. He'll destroy you. This is all my fault."

"No, it's not. Truly. Let it go. It's my choice, win or lose."

"You're right on both counts, Raheem, it is your choice. And I really don't understand you." She turned to go.

"Miss Mullaney? The nightclub where I work . . . what did you call it that time?"

"A blind pig?"

"Right. Blind pig. Anyway, people gossip there, too. Word is, you and me got a thing goin' on."

"A thing?"

"You know. Because I'm out here every morning waiting for you, they think we're lovers."

"It's the same in the post office. In a way I wish we were. This might make some kind of sense if we were lovers."

"No, it's better this way. Lovers come and go. In the clubs and the blind pigs, some people find new ones every night. But real friends are as rare as gold. And a lot harder to come by. Thank you for trying to help. For being a friend."

She wanted to argue, to change his mind somehow. But she could read the set of his face. And knew she hadn't the words for it. So she left him standing like a great oak in the shadows of the alley. With the drumbeat from the blind pig thundering up from the ground. And the angry lyrics roiling in the air around him.

Back in her office cubicle, Shirley tried to dismiss it all. Push it out of her mind. Raheem was right. They weren't lovers. Hell, they were practically strangers. She didn't really know him, or anything about his life. And she didn't owe him a thing. She'd done her best to warn him. Realistically, what else could she do? Nothing.

Nothing at all.

And she had troubles of her own. Distracted by the chaos of the morning, she made a complete botch of the carrier assignments, earning a royal chewing-out by Harry Tuttle. It was her first taste of Tuttle's famous temper. But she scarcely heard it.

As her boss ranted on about her shortcomings, she was lost in thought, trying to remember what time Raheem had dropped off

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her umbrella. Nine? My God, it was already ten past. He must already be on his way home. . . .

"Excuse me," she said, interrupting Tuttle in mid tirade. "I think you've covered everything and I have to be somewhere."

"What?" he sputtered. "Look, I'm not finished with you—"

"Sure you are. You made your point ten minutes ago, Mr. Tuttle. I screwed up. Sorry about that. It won't happen again. And I really do have to go."

"See here, Miss Mullaney—"

But Shirley was already hurrying to the parking lot, leaving Tuttle with his mouth open. And the rest of the sorting room abuzz. Whispering. Trying to conceal their grins.

Scrambling into her car, she burned rubber out of the lot, racing to Pioneer Park. Maybe Pete was bluffing. He wouldn't really railroad an innocent man. He was a policeman, for God's sake!

A cop who drove a new Corvette. And let a blind pig operate on his beat. He was obviously crooked. And an egomaniac as well. But would he really go that far over the line? In her heart, she knew the answer. This wasn't really about her at all. It was about Pete's ego. And Raheem's stubborn pride.

She had no plan, only a vague idea of heading Raheem off, trying to talk sense into—

But he was already there! As she roared into the Pioneer parking lot, she saw Raheem disappearing down the bike path.

"Raheem!" she called, scrambling out of her car. He was too far off. Didn't hear. Or didn't want to. Damn it!

Hurrying after him, she was only halfway across the lot when she heard a shot.

"Halt! Hold it, asshole! Right where you are!" Pete's voice.

Stunned, Shirley froze for a moment. Then she was running, pounding down the bike path toward the shouting.

Rounding the curve, she saw Raheem standing with his hands raised. Pete DeVries was behind him, his gun jammed in the small of Raheem's back, frisking him roughly.

"Pete! What are you doing?"

Startled by her shout, DeVries turned toward her. Instantly, Raheem whirled around, grabbing Pete's weapon. The two men wrestled for it, straining. Locked together. Closer than lovers.

"STOP IT!" Shirley screamed.

They didn't hear. Lost in murderous fury, they were deaf and blind to everything but their own struggle, their own rage.

Slowly, inch by inch, Raheem forced Pete's gun hand down until the weapon was between them. And then the gun fired. Once, twice!

Both men staggered back, clutching wounds. Dropping to his

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knees, Pete stared up at Shirley, dazed. Tried to speak, couldn't manage it, then toppled to the ground. Eyes staring blankly up at the sun. Pupils dilated. Seeing nothing at all.

Raheem stumbled a few paces down the path, then collapsed. Curling into a fetal crouch, he clasped his hands tightly over a belly wound, moaning.

Grabbing the cell phone from Pete's utility belt, Shirley dialed 911 and called for an ambulance. Kneeling, she pressed two fingertips against Pete's carotid artery. No pulse. He was gone. Rising, she hurried to the fallen giant.

"Raheem—"

"Get away from here," he gasped. "Go on. There's nothing you can do now."

"But it's my fault."

"No. It's mine. And his. Our luck. Our fate. Is he dead?"

She nodded.

"Damn! I never meant—Run, girl. Go on. Get yourself out of this."

But she stayed with him instead, cradling his head in her lap until the ambulance came.

She told an angry patrolman what happened. And later gave an official statement to an even angrier detective.

The following day, she was called in to the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice building and grilled nonstop for four hours. Intensely. By two furious detectives and a hard-eyed assistant prosecutor. A woman.

Every question was etched in acid as they tried to twist her words and the situation around, trying to make Raheem the aggressor and take DeVries off the hook.

Shirley kept it simple, stuck to the truth. They couldn't shake her. But in the end it didn't matter. They'd already heard Raheem was her lover. They didn't believe a word she said.

Nor did the reporters who camped outside her apartment and called around the clock. She had her number changed to unlisted. The calls stopped, but only for a few hours, then began again.

She bought an answering machine and only returned calls to her friends. There weren't many of those.

When her marriage crashed, Shirley thought her life had hit rock bottom. She was wrong. This was far worse. Strangers practically spat on the street as she passed.

Raheem survived his wounds but was charged with first-degree murder while he was still hospitalized in intensive care.

Shirley was asked to take a lie-detector test. She did. And passed it. The prosecutor dismissed it. Inconclusive.

At the post office, Mr. Tuttle suspended her from her duties. A

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temporary suspension, with pay. But he made it clear it would be best if she used the free time to look for another job.

She thought about it. But as the shock of the shooting wore off, her Irish spunk returned. Along with her temper and tenacity. Damn it, she loved her job and she hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe Tuttle could find a way to fire her, but she wouldn't make it easy for him.

She wouldn't quit. Period. End of story.

Instead, she used the time off to attack her new apartment. Painted the walls, scrubbed the cupboards and floors until it sparkled from the ceiling to the baseboards. Bought a few pieces of secondhand furniture, rearranged everything twice.

When she finished, it felt like a home. And Shirley felt better, too. Not much. But a little.

She almost missed the phone call because the voice wasn't familiar. He said his name was Mustafa Kemal X. But he wasn't a cop or a reporter. He was Raheem Muhammed's defense attorney.

Shirley met Mr. X at a Starbucks near the Murphy Building. A slender, elderly gentleman with an elegant silver goatee. His conservative gray suit was impeccably tailored. So were his manners. He rose, smiling, when she entered. He even held her chair.

And her heart sank. Kemal X seemed far too kindly, and too frail, for the dogfight Raheem's trial would certainly be.

Over coffee, Shirley repeated everything that had happened. When she finished, he asked a few polite questions, then leaned back in his chair, eyeing her quizzically across the bridge of his fingertips.

"That's really the truth, isn't it?" he said at last. "You two were never lovers. My client told me the same thing but I didn't believe him. I assumed he was trying to protect you."

"No. We said hello a few times, I loaned him an umbrella. The rest was just office gossip."

He nodded. "People will talk. Especially when the story's juicy enough. The press has been full of it. The freckle-faced jezebel. Love triangle. Duel to the death. Maybe you should sell the movie rights."

"But none of it's true."

"No, I see that now. But perhaps . . . " He glanced away a moment, lost in thought. Then he leaned forward, meeting her eyes. And she realized she'd been wrong about him. Kemal's gaze was as icy as a polar floe.

"All right. So you're not Raheem's lover. Are you his friend?"

"I don't know. I want to help, but the truth is, I don't really know him all that well."

"Fair enough. Then let me give you some facts about Mr. Muhammed. He made a mistake when he was younger. He paid

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for it, in full, but now he's an ex-convict. Which means that if he goes to trial, he'll probably be convicted. Raheem is a fearsome-looking man. A frightened jury might lock him up just to keep him off the street."

"But this fight wasn't Raheem's fault. DeVries rousted him. He all but admitted he meant to frame him."

"Perhaps so." Kemal shrugged. "But that doesn't make Raheem entirely innocent. You warned him about DeVries. He could have avoided that confrontation. He chose not to. And now the prosecution has a dead policeman and Raheem's record of past violence. And all my client has is . . . you."

"Me? Look, if you want me to lie, forget it. I won't, and it wouldn't help. No one would believe me anyway."

"I know," he smiled. "Actually, I'm rather counting on that."

"Counting on . . . what? I don't understand."

"The prosecution doesn't want a trial. DeVries was a crooked cop, his car and the blind pig on his beat prove that. And he tried to arrest him alone, which violated standard police procedure.

"Because of all the 'love triangle' publicity, a sentimental jury might believe DeVries and Raheem really did fight to the death over you. That Raheem was only defending himself. But without the romance, all they'll see is a mugging suspect resisting arrest. Is that what you want?"

"No. It wasn't like that."

"Then I have a great favor to ask of you, Miss Mullaney. I wouldn't dream of asking you to lie. But I need something almost as difficult."

"What?"

"Your silence. You've told the truth. But no one believes it. They prefer a fantasy. Let them have it. Let the press spin this shambles into a tragic love story. Othello in Motown. Loose talk got you two into this mess, Miss Mullaney. Perhaps it can get you out."

And it did. More or less. After weeks of lurid press speculation, the prosecution and Kemal X hammered out a plea bargain. Raheem agreed to plead guilty to second-degree homicide. In return, his sentence was limited to five years, with parole guaranteed for good behavior. And Raheem was a model prisoner.

As the months passed, Shirley visited him every second weekend. And they played chess in the day room. And talked of many things. Her problems at the post office. The wisdom of the Prophet. Life, and love, and "What's it all about, Alfie?" The things friends talk about, when they find the time.

She expected trouble at her job and got it. Tuttle tried to harass her into quitting. Changed her duties without notice, criticized every little error. Publicly. But not for long.

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After a fiery visit from Shirley's new attorney, Mr. Mustafa Kemal X, Frank Tuttle and his bosses faced a hard truth. Shirley Mullaney was a bureaucrat's worst nightmare. An assertive woman with good press connections and a mad-dog civil-rights lawyer.

The harassment ceased. Instead, they offered Shirley a new assignment. To any station she chose. With a promotion. They even promised Raheem a job in security after his release.

The couple could live happily ever after. If they wanted to.

They didn't.

Despite the visits, the long talks and laughter, their genuine affection for each other never caught fire.

Shirley and Raheem never became lovers. Perhaps they saw the world too differently to make a match.

It was just as well. Lovers come and go. In the clubs and the blind pigs, some people find new ones every night.

But true friends are as rare as gold. And much harder to come by. ●

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Murdering Mrs. Limegate

by Donald Olson

"Darling, don't forget we're dining with Mother on Friday." Margery Osborne, trying on a new frock in front of the bedroom mirror, regarded her ample hips with an appraising frown.

"You'd better ring her and put it off," said her husband Darwin. "Something's come up."

Margery got that look on her florid face that made her look even more like her mother. Darwin often thought if they hadn't in every way looked so much alike, he might have found it less difficult to feign affection for his wife.

"Oh, but we couldn't do that," she protested. "She's had another of her little spells. Something's upset her. I could tell from her voice on the phone."

"Sorry, my love, but I must go out of town for a few days. I told you I'm having lunch with Flip today. Fact is, he's in a bit of a muddle out there. That's why he flew in. He needs my advice. His accountants are idiots, obviously—or crooks. I'll have to go out there. I've no choice. Flip and I were best friends in college."

Margery relented. "You're sometimes too good, sweetheart. I'll explain to Mother. I often think she doesn't value your good qualities."

Darwin shot her a guarded glance. "Why? What has she been saying?"

"Well, nothing specific. You know how evasive she can be when

Donald Olson has a knack for taking stock characters and turning them on their heads: the scapegrace son-in-law, the pliable wife, the interfering mother-in-law. Like Readers Award winner Jeffery Deaver, he most often writes a twist-in-the-tail story with an O. Henry-like ending. His stories for *EQMM* arrive in large batches, in-between which we don't hear from him for many months. If you're a fan, don't worry; a new bundle just reached our desks. ¶

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something's upset her."

Darwin relaxed. Apparently Mrs. Limegate had kept her promise—so far—about remaining silent for the grace period she'd given Darwin. *Coup de grâce* period, if she only knew, thought Darwin with a secret smile.

Murdering Mrs. Limegate was the only way out of the fix he was in. No other options were possible. He was not wholly devoid of humane instincts, but he was also desperate.

Margery's late father had owned a string of profitable East Coast auction galleries where Darwin had seemed destined to remain a functionary in the accounting department. Upon Limegate's death, his widow Edith, her semi-invalid condition notwithstanding, had taken over the corporate reins and had felt duty-bound to offer her son-in-law the posts of treasurer and managing vice-president, a generous but ill-advised decision, as Darwin, had he been honest, could have told her. Honesty, however, had never been one of Darwin's virtues, either in business or in affairs of the heart; indeed, he regarded his marriage as more of the former than the latter. Margery was to be a steppingstone, not a sidewalk.

Given time, being as clever and astute as he was, Darwin might have succeeded in robbing Edith blind had he not overestimated his mother-in-law's myopia in business matters. She was as shrewd as he was devious. Alerted to certain irregularities, Mrs. Limegate had ordered a secret audit. Darwin found himself on the executive carpet, being asked to explain two of the most incriminating discrepancies. Mrs. Limegate had given him a week's grace period to produce a plausible explanation before taking action or spilling everything to her daughter.

Darwin had realized that the only way he could get himself off the hook was by coming up with a very hefty bundle of cash within a matter of days, and as the commodities market had seriously depleted his store of fraudulently acquired funds, this was like expecting a dead chicken to lay eggs.

Then had come the call from Flip Crossman. Flip the entrepreneur. Flip, successful owner of a posh Arizona resort motel. Darwin felt sure Flip would bail him out.

Primed by two double martinis, Darwin was about to do his number on Crossman when his friend, with a faltering, shamefaced smile, said gravely: "I'll not insult you, Darwin, by beating about the bush. Having lost all but my shirt, it would be sheer vanity to cling to my pride. I'm quite desperate, old buddy. You're my last hope."

Oh, irony of ironies. They were both in the same boat, both sinking.

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"I'm talking bankruptcy, Darwin. I'm talking receivership. I'm talking financial ruin—unless I come up with the cash to turn things around."

Until now, Darwin had dismissed his friend's somewhat seedy appearance as evidence of that casual disregard for the niceties of attire that was the reverse vanity of the rich.

"Good God, Flip, what happened?"

"Politics. When the lawmakers revoked my casino gambling license—I won't go into the reasons—the El Dorado was finished. I was already seriously overextended at the bank. The El Dorado is now the El Mistako. Banks won't give me the time of day. That's why I've come to you."

Darwin felt that it would be needlessly cruel to reveal the absurdity of the pauper appealing to the impoverished. He remained silent while Crossman spelled out the details of the proposition he was offering.

Taking a pen from his pocket to scribble some figures on a napkin, Crossman dislodged a postcard, glanced at it, and handed it across the table with a rueful grimace. "Care for a souvenir? Picture of a shattered dream."

A view of the El Dorado at sunset. Darwin might have pocketed the card with a murmur of sympathy had it not in the flash of an instant inspired one of those wild, out-of-the-blue ideas that could excite only the truly desperate mind. He scarcely listened to what his friend was saying as he bounced the idea around in his brain to see if it had more substance than a soap bubble.

When Crossman fell silent, as if realizing the balloon he'd so hopefully inflated held nothing but hot air, his face lengthened and he dropped his eyes. Darwin immediately gave his own balloon a test launch.

"Flip, old pal, I'd like to help you. You know that. But you must understand, I don't have instant access to that kind of money. But listen. I'm floating a deal right now that promises to put a substantial bonus in my account. It's all very hush-hush. Involves a bit of corporate hugger-muggery. To put it simply, it would be highly advantageous if I could be thought by certain parties to be in one place when I'm actually in another. See what I mean? Now if I were to write a message on this postcard and address it to Margery, would you mail it for me when you get home, on a certain day?"

Hope restored a gleam of humor to Crossman's worried blue eyes. "You mean you want to pull the wool over Margery's eyes as well?"

"Not so much Margery's as Mrs. Limegate's. There's no way Margery could keep a secret from her mother. It's all part of a delicate strategy move, Flip. If I can rely on you to do this for me, and

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to make some excuse to anyone who might try to reach me at the El Dorado why I can't come to the phone, then I'm prepared to help you out of your bind."

"Within three weeks?"

"Easily. Well, roughly, anyway."

They were having breakfast on the patio the morning Darwin planned to put his stratagem into operation. Margery appeared not to have slept well. There were muddy circles around her eyes and she hadn't brushed her auburn hair to its usual luster. She had already talked to her mother on the phone.

"How is she?" asked Darwin, greedily popping sections of grapefruit into his mouth.

"Not well. Not well at all. But no worse, according to what her doctor told me when I inquired. He said it was essential her heart be spared any emotional stress. She's worried about something, though. I can tell. She hasn't sounded like herself the past few days. You don't know of anything at the office that might have disturbed her, do you, dear?"

"Not a thing. But I do wish she'd do herself a favor and stay away from the office. It's almost as if she doesn't trust me to handle our affairs."

"Nonsense. She has complete faith in you. But you're right. She ought really to stay home and concentrate on conserving her strength."

Later Margery helped Darwin pack his bags for what she believed was to be a trip to Arizona. "I don't know why you don't fly," she kept insisting. "You could be there and back so much sooner."

"You know I don't like flying. There's no great rush. I'll enjoy the drive. Stop for meals and spend one night on the road. It's less than a thousand miles."

Darwin prided himself on anticipating every possible contingency, no matter how remote. He was confident of relying upon Flip for his alibi, but what if something *did* go wrong? He didn't want the airlines testifying that no Darwin Osborne had been on any flights to or from Arizona.

He drove straight to the cabin in the foothills north of Gresham. Mrs. Limegate never used the cabin after her husband, an avid sportsman, died. Darwin and Margery had gone up there for only the occasional weekend. Her own garden was the only outdoors Margery appreciated.

By now Darwin had decided how he would kill his mother-in-law, suffocation being the cleanest, safest, and most obvious method in view of her tricky heart and chronic emphysema. Dar-

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win knew that Mrs. Limegate pilled herself to sleep in a room that must be totally dark, one of those whimsical notions, like refusing to eat red meat or to make decisions on Fridays, which Margery had religiously adopted. Whatever Mother did was the *right* thing to do.

Darwin reckoned the odds to be very much against Edith's death being attributed to foul play, not only because of her precarious health but because there would be no signs of any break-in or robbery. He had a copy of Margery's key to her mother's house and knew all the hazards, physical and electronic, to be avoided.

Two nights later he phoned Margery from a call box on the expressway three miles from the cabin. He assured her he had arrived safely at the El Dorado, that the weather was brutally hot, and that Flip's situation was even more dire than he'd been led to believe. He asked if she had called her mother and explained about Friday.

Margery sighed. "I did, but you know Mother. She wasn't at all pleased. And she made the most extraordinary remark when I told her you'd driven to Arizona. She said, 'Are you sure he's coming back?' "

"Extraordinary? Snotty's what I'd call it. What else did she say?"

"Nothing really."

Darwin had stressed to Flip the importance of mailing the postcard on Wednesday. Still two days ahead. Meanwhile, with no other diversions available, he settled down to read a couple of thrillers he'd brought with him to the cabin. Their plots seemed to him far less ingenious than his own.

When the night arrived for him to leave the cabin for the drive to Gresham, fog had begun to settle in the low-lying areas and before he reached the turnoff to Fern Park, the Limegate estate, visibility was only marginally improved by fog lights and windshield wipers. A night only madmen, murderers, and lusting cats would venture from their doorsteps. Darwin parked at the foot of the lane behind a screen of dripping willows, climbed over the low stone wall, and made his way through the thickening fog up the long sweep of the lawn to the terrace at the back of the fieldstone mansion. At three in the morning, the house was totally dark. Darwin felt a surge of confidence. It was all so easy; criminally easy.

Darwin knew that the housekeeper of many years, Mrs. Roughwood, occupied a two-room suite on the third floor. The daily help would not arrive before nine in the morning. Using his key, he unlocked the door and disengaged the alarm, a primitive device he himself had warned Mrs. Limegate was wholly inadequate.

The house was still. He paused only once as the sudden chiming of a clock in the hall took him by surprise. Then he advanced cau-

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tiously up the thickly carpeted stairs and moved along the passage to Mrs. Limegate's room.

Nothing, he later congratulated himself, could have been simpler. So still and motionless lay the sleeping woman she might already have been dead as Darwin, treading even more carefully now in the lightless room, circled the queen-size bed, gently lifted the unused pillow, returned to the sleeper's side, and lowered it at first lightly and then with increasing pressure upon the unresisting head.

At that moment he was happy to share Mrs. Limegate's aversion to light, silly or not. Had some instinct of danger awakened her at the critical moment, how unsettling to have glimpsed her face, seen those imperious eyes flash with terror as the pillow descended. As it was, the darkness shrouded the face as effectively as a veil of mourning.

Presently he relaxed the iron tension in his arms, felt briefly for the carotid artery, and made certain she was dead.

An hour later he was back at the cabin toasting his achievement with a stiff drink. It rather tickled his vanity to realize, even if no one else did, that he was now top dog at Limegate Enterprises. How extraordinary that it might never have happened if poor old Flip hadn't casually pulled that postcard from his pocket.

As he'd promised Margery in his call from "Arizona," Darwin arrived home forty-eight hours after committing what he confidently believed to have been the perfect murder. The timing of events had been as meticulously planned as had been the details of the murder. By now Margery would have tried to reach him at Flip's number. Flip would have told her that Darwin had shortly before left for the trip home.

Margery was not at home, but there was a note by the telephone in the foyer. All it said was, *Call me at Mother's when you get home.*

Poor Margery. She must be frantic to give him the tragic news.

His call to Fern Park was answered by Mrs. Roughwood.

"Oh, Mr. Osborne, thank goodness," she squealed breathlessly. "We'd hoped to reach you before you left your friend's."

"I just now got in the door."

"Sir, you'd better get over here right now. There's been—there's been an accident."

Accident. Silly creature. Of course that's how the prim Mrs. Roughwood would characterize any fatality, no matter how devastating. Poor old thing. Darwin wondered if Mrs. Limegate had remembered her in her will.

At Fern Park the housekeeper opened the door to him. Her well-padded figure was garbed in black, her expression one of bereavement that betrayed a faintly discernible eagerness to impart bad news.

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In the oak-paneled living room, which always reminded Darwin of a funeral parlor, she said, "Please sit down, Mr. Osborne. May I get you anything? Tea? A sherry?"

Oh, she was enjoying it, thought Darwin. He'd never liked the woman. Too mealy-mouthed. Too slavishly devoted to her employer.

"No, thank you. Just tell me what happened. An accident, you said. Is my wife here?"

Before she could reply, another voice spoke his name from the doorway. "Darwin?"

Margery advanced slowly into the room. But one step and the illusion passed. It wasn't Margery. Darwin leaped up, goggling in disbelief. Pale and frail, Mrs. Limegate's ghost moved toward him—only, of course, it wasn't her ghost.

"My poor boy, do sit down. You look terrible."

A protest rose angrily from Darwin's lips. "I don't understand. What happened? Where is Margery?"

For even then, without being told, he knew.

Mrs. Limegate beckoned him to sit beside her on the floral-printed sofa. Her eyes, normally so alert, appeared lifeless in a wrinkled face, wasted by a long illness and a fresh grief. She regarded Darwin with uncharacteristic gentleness. "None of us really understands. Even Dr. Spellman. She never spoke of any health problems, did she? Her heart must have been even more fragile than my own. That's all we know. She passed away peacefully in her sleep."

"She was tired, poor dear," said Mrs. Roughwood. "Well, we both were. The doctor had forbidden Mrs. Limegate to use the stairs after last week's little incident. Mrs. Osborne and me, we finally got her settled into a makeshift bedroom on this floor. Mrs. Osborne decided to spend the night, you not being at home and all. I changed the linen and she went to sleep in her mother's room. . . . Sir, are you all right?"

"Perhaps some tea," suggested Mrs. Limegate. "Or would you prefer something more fortifying, Darwin? A brandy? One can see what a shock this has been."

Darwin mopped the cold sweat from his forehead. "Did you call the police?"

Mrs. Limegate looked at him with a puzzled frown. "Police? There was no need for anything like that."

Mrs. Roughwood handed him a tumbler of brandy. "We tried to reach you at the number you left with Mrs. Osborne. Your friend said you were on the road and ought to arrive by tonight."

"Did you tell him what happened?"

"No, we told him nothing."

Mrs. Limegate gently removed the tumbler from his hand. "I know how frightfully shocked you are, Darwin, but arrangements must be discussed, difficult as it is."

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Arrangements. Darwin was having trouble enough trying to arrange his thoughts. His brain was still numb, his mind unprepared to come to grips with the consequences of what he had done. Margery was dead. Margery was dead and he had killed her. Meanwhile, the threat remained, the threat of whatever actions Mrs. Limegate intended to pursue in regard to his misappropriation of company funds.

Or did her present solicitude, her apparent concern for their common loss, foreshadow a softening in her attitude? Was she going to permit him to redeem himself?

Arrangements were made, in the course of which Mrs. Limegate entreated Darwin to stay at Fern Park until after the funeral. Her manner toward him betrayed none of its former hostility.

On the evening of the day following the funeral, Mrs. Limegate and Darwin were sharing a late supper served by Mrs. Roughwood in the somberly furnished dining room. Feeling relaxed after imbibing his share of a bottle of Chardonnay, and hoping it might be having the same effect on Mrs. Limegate, Darwin ventured to introduce the topic weighing so heavily on his mind.

"Edith," he said, "about that little problem at the office—"

"Hush, Darwin. Not now. I'd prefer not to think about business. There'll be lots of time to discuss company affairs."

Disappointed but undismayed, Darwin took another sip of wine. "Of course. Whatever you say."

"Did I mention that Ben Stormer called me? The day after it—after it happened?"

"Ben who?"

"Stormer. You remember him. An old and valued employee. Retired now. Does only caretaking work. He wanted to tender his condolences. Asked me what plans I had for the cabin, wondered if I might consider selling it. He was very good about keeping his eye on the place."

Darwin wished she hadn't mentioned the cabin. Yet some response seemed called for.

"What did you tell him?"

"I said it was too soon to be making plans about anything."

"Margery never liked the cabin. She was never one for roughing it."

Mrs. Limegate always retired early, so Darwin had no choice but to do the same. Yet on this night the old lady did not immediately head for bed. She had too much to think about. To brood about. Though physically infirm, her mental powers were unimpaired. After she'd talked to Ben Stormer, it had not taken her long to put two and two together.

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The caretaker had happened to mention during their talk that three nights earlier, while driving along the road below the cabin, he'd chanced to notice what he thought might be a light in the window. Mindful of his duties, he'd parked along the road and climbed the shallow grade and then creepy-crawled to where he could peek through the cabin window. Relieved to discover it was Mrs. Limegate's son-in-law sitting in the room, his nose in a book, he had retreated without disturbing him.

When he'd mentioned this to Mrs. Limegate, she'd made no other comment than to thank him for his vigilance.

So much for Darwin's trip to Arizona. Just another lie, clearly for no other purpose but to invent an alibi for the night Margery died, the night when Darwin would have expected her, Edith, to be asleep in her own room. If Dr. Spellman weren't such a doddering old fool, he wouldn't have been so quick to dismiss Margery's death as a heart attack.

Nor had Mrs. Limegate missed that swift, furtive look of relief on Darwin's face when she'd said no, there had been no reason to inform the police.

Mrs. Roughwood brought a cup of cocoa up to Darwin soon after he retired. And it was Mrs. Roughwood who found him dead in bed the next morning.

This time it was expedient, Mrs. Limegate reasoned, to contact the police.

As Margery's death had been attributed to heart failure, so Darwin's, upon the evidence, had been judged a suicide. He had ingested a lethal amount of digitalis.

"My daughter's death, so unexpected," Mrs. Limegate told the police, "was a crushing blow to poor Darwin. He was quite mad with grief. He said more than once he had nothing left to live for. And of course he knew where my digitalis was kept."

And then, smiling sadly at Mrs. Roughwood, who had nodded agreement to all that was said: "Dear me, I almost feel responsible for the poor boy's death." ●

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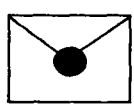

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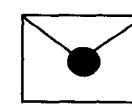

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The Orchard of Caged Birds

by Edward D. Hoch

It was in late November of 1793, shortly after the abatement of the yellow-fever plague in Philadelphia, that Alexander Swift returned home to his wife and son in Maryland. Molly had prepared a special dinner for them, as she always did when he returned from a journey, and after they sent young George up to bed they sat talking before the fire.

"That plague could have killed you," she said. "Sometimes you take terrible risks, Alex. Your feud with Benedict Arnold has become an obsession with you."

"Arnold was nowhere near Philadelphia. He's in London with his family."

"I know you'll never forgive him for his treasonous actions at West Point."

Swift nodded. "It's hard to believe we were once friends, or that

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he was a hero at the battle of Saratoga."

"What was he like back then, Alex? You never talk about it."

He smiled. "I don't like to bore you with the years when I was married to Amanda." Swift's first wife had left him for a British officer when the Revolution broke out. The officer was later killed, but Amanda had married for a third time and was living a good life in New York.

"Go ahead," she urged. "Bore me."

"Well, there was one incident at Saratoga that certainly wasn't boring. As you know, the British under Burgoyne moved south from Canada in an attempt to link up with Sir Henry Clinton's forces advancing north along the Hudson. If they'd succeeded, the New England colonies would have been cut off from the rest of the Union and our Revolution might well have failed. General Gates was dispatched to take command of the army at Saratoga and Arnold was sent under him with reinforcements from the main American army. As a captain, Arnold had fought bravely during the early months of the war. In the spring of 'seventy-five he began a bitter rivalry with Ethan Allen, the commander of Vermont's Green Mountain Boys. The two men were given joint command of an attack on Fort Ticonderoga, a British arsenal on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain. The attack was successful but their dispute continued. When Arnold returned home to New Haven he learned that his first wife had died, leaving their three young sons in the care of his sister."

"I had forgotten that Peggy was his second wife."

Swift nodded. "Perhaps his first wife's death changed him. He grew more daring, and in July of 'seventy-five he persuaded General Washington to put him in charge of an overland expedition against Quebec. In late September, leading eleven hundred men on a six-week march, he started out. It was a terrible journey, through swamps and bad weather, and by the time they reached the Canadian city the cold rains of November were falling. Only six hundred of his men were still able to fight. They camped across the river from the city for more than a month before finally attacking in a snowstorm on New Year's Eve. The attack was beaten back,

Benedict Arnold was unique: a hero for both sides in the American Revolution. In past adventures of his Revolutionary War spy Alexander Swift and his nemesis, Arnold, author Edward D. Hoch has dealt only with Arnold's betrayals. He touches this time, instead, on his heroism at the battle of Saratoga, a turning point of the war. Around the battlefield action Mr. Hoch weaves a complex, atmospheric whodunit. †

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and Arnold was wounded in the leg. He remained at the camp with his men for several months, hoping for reinforcements, but finally retreated in June of 'seventy-six. All this, of course, was before our Declaration of Independence, and before the colonies were truly united in revolution."

Molly smiled at him. "You are a great history professor, but tell me about Saratoga."

"Well, Arnold was a brigadier general by then, but a dispute over some missing expense vouchers may have delayed his elevation to major general. He fought like a tiger at every opportunity, leading volunteers against the redcoats when his native Connecticut was threatened in April of 'seventy-seven. His horse was shot out from under him but he drew his pistol and shot a redcoat trying to take him prisoner. A few days later, the Continental Congress commissioned him as a major general."

"Alex, Saratoga," Molly reminded him again.

"Saratoga. By late summer of that year, Burgoyne's army was heading south, attempting to join up with General Clinton's men at Albany and cut the colonies in two. Arnold begged to launch an attack on Burgoyne, but General Gates preferred to cut his supply lines first. He discounted reports that General Clinton was sailing up the Hudson. In early October I rode north, skirting the British lines, to find out the truth. . . ."

It didn't take long to establish that British ships from New York were on the move, but they were only at Peekskill, still some distance from Albany. Swift rode on, avoiding the British, until he was north of Albany, approaching Saratoga. He found General Gates's encampment without difficulty, identified himself through a safe-conduct pass from Washington, and asked to see Benedict Arnold.

The general was in his tent, staring bleakly at a map of the area, when Swift entered. He was thirty-nine at the time, a broad-shouldered man of great strength and self-confidence. "Alexander Swift!" he exclaimed, standing to shake his hand. "What brings you this far north?"

"A mission for General Washington, sir. He wishes to know the true nature of the situation here."

Arnold motioned toward the map. "Burgoyne's army is almost upon us. They are moving slowly and we have fought back well, but their losses have been few. Our men are in retreat and General Gates does nothing. He fears that spies report our troop movements to the English. I swear to you, Swift, there have been times recently when I have questioned whether this is a war worth fighting."

"You can't mean that!"

Benedict Arnold stared up at him. "Does General Washington

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know that Gates has relieved me of my command?"

His words took Swift by surprise. "I'm sure he does not. What has happened here?"

"Over the next rise, a few miles away, is a place called Freeman's farm. When Gates would not move against the redcoats there, I took matters into my own hands. I spearheaded an attack on the farm two weeks ago. Though we inflicted a grievous blow to Burgoyne and forced him to retreat, Gates was furious. I offered to resign and Gates quickly accepted. I was to leave here and head back to Washington's troops in Philadelphia."

"But you have stayed."

"I am reluctant to leave. Burgoyne is advancing again, and Gates is doing little to stop him. He sends a few men to cautiously harass the British while staying well away from the fighting himself. I believe another attack at Freeman's farm, or at Bemis Heights overlooking it, could surprise Burgoyne and force him back. I am prepared to lead such an attack, with or without General Gates's approval."

Swift could sense Arnold's impatience all too well, yet he tried to forestall any rash action. "Let me do a bit of scouting first," he suggested.

"If you're caught you could be shot or hanged as a spy."

"I'll risk that. Give me a map of the area."

Arnold produced one from the papers on his table. "This is Freeman's farm, just west of the Hudson. Bemis Heights is south of it, and we are further south, right here along the river."

"So approach from the east is blocked by the river," Swift mused. "What about the west side?"

"That is the Meuse farm. It's a strange place and we've kept our distance from it."

"Strange in what way?"

"They don't seem to do much farming, but an orchard by the house has birdcages hanging in the trees. There are birds of every sort, close to a hundred, and they set up a terrible cry when anyone approaches."

"Like watchdogs."

"I suppose so, yes," Arnold agreed. "But it seems very odd."

"Have you spoken to the farm's owner?"

"No. There is a woman who is often seen at the place. I call her the bird lady. She keeps her distance from both sides. The front lines are very fluid there. We send out our patrols and so does Burgoyne."

Swift nodded. "I'll set out in the morning. Don't do anything rash until I return."

The red-coated British troops were easy to spot, the darker uniforms of their Hessian allies were more difficult, and the Indians

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Burgoyne employed were almost invisible in the woods. The Indians were good fighters, but there were occasional barbarous atrocities when they attacked a farm. Burgoyne tried to prevent the outrages, but Swift knew they were having the effect of turning more of the colonists against the British.

Swift rode in a wide circle to avoid them all, catching a distant hint of bells, and came upon the Meuse farm from the west. He approached an apple orchard, not realizing until too late that it was the orchard of the caged birds. They set up a clatter that might have been heard a mile away. He dismounted at once, leading his horse slowly in hopes of calming them down. The caged birds were of all sorts, many of them doves and pigeons but including a few bluebirds, robins, and cardinals. There were even a couple of parrots sharing a large cage. In all, he counted fifty cages in the orchard, most holding two birds each.

"Who are you?" a woman's voice called out from the porch of the farmhouse.

"A mere traveler," Swift told her, seeing the musket she held pointed at him. He doubted if she could fire accurately at that range but he wasn't about to find out.

"There is a war on. There are armies just over the next hill."

"Then perhaps it is wise that I stop here and continue after dark."

"No. That would not be wise." She lifted the gun to her shoulder.

"Why do you keep all those birds in the orchard?"

"To confound people like yourself who ask the question. Tell me, sir, are you a Rebel or a Loyalist?"

"I am an American, name of Alexander Swift, from New York." He strode a bit closer with his horse while they talked, and now he had a clearer view of her face. He guessed her to be in her twenties, with dark hair pulled back in a bun, a few wisps of it falling over her face. It was a gentle face, Swift decided, and he hoped she wouldn't squeeze the trigger. Holding his hands up, he dropped the reins of the horse and strode toward her.

She lowered the weapon as he approached. "You're a brave man, sir."

"Do you have a name?" he asked.

"Selma."

"Selma Meuse?"

She shook her head. "Selma O'Hara. Mr. Meuse is inside. Would you like to see him?"

Something was wrong. Swift realized that her face was pale and beaded with sweat. Behind him, the birds still chattered. "Yes," he answered. "It would be a pleasure to meet him."

"I said see him, not meet him."

She led the way into the parlor and stood aside as Swift entered.

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A bald man was seated at the dining room table, his head thrown back. An Indian tomahawk was embedded in his skull.

Swift tensed immediately, fearful he'd been led into a British trap, but the young woman had put down her weapon. "I found him like this a few minutes ago," she said. "He was my uncle. Uncle Franz." Though her voice was firm, he could see that she was trembling a bit. He checked the dead man's hands for some sort of defensive wounds but there were none. Apparently he'd been killed without warning, and the body was still warm.

"Did you live here with him?"

She shook her head. "He was alone since his wife died. I rode over here every few days to see if he needed anything."

"Who are you?"

"I told you. Selma O'Hara."

"From the next farm?"

"Until it became a battlefield. My folks moved into town and I've been staying with neighbors so I could watch over Uncle Franz." She glanced quickly at his body and then away.

"Have there been Indian attacks here before?"

She shook her head. "I have heard stories that the redcoats are employing Indians, but I have witnessed nothing like this."

"If your uncle lived here alone why didn't you stay here rather than with a neighbor?"

"The birds," she said simply. "They make such noise when they get to chattering. I couldn't stand living here. He would spend his days tending to them, feeding them, and cleaning out their cages. It was the only thing he lived for."

"I will notify General Gates's men of this atrocity. They will send a burial detail."

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't know what I was going to do."

"What about the birds?"

"I'll feed and water them today. Then I might have to turn them loose."

Something was bothering Swift and he paused to look again at the body of Franz Meuse. "Would an Indian warrior leave his tomahawk in the head of his victim?" he wondered. "Wouldn't he take it with him, to be used again?"

"It was meant to terrify us," the young woman said. "To make us flee from our homes."

"Perhaps. In any event, you're not safe here. The Indian attack may have been a prelude to an encircling maneuver by Burgoyne. I can escort you back to General Gates's camp where you'll be safe."

"Then you are not a mere traveler as you proclaimed."

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"In wartime, truth is often the first casualty," he told her. "Gather up your things."

"The birds—"

"Release them. I'll help you."

"All right. I have nothing else here. My horse is outside."

They went down the lines of cages, opening the little doors. Some birds took flight at once, others hovered for a time in the shelter of their cages. "What did he do in the bad weather?" Swift asked.

"Brought them into the barn, but there was not really room for all these cages. Happily these days have been warm and dry for early October. He took good care of them, cleaning their cages and feeding them even though they often bloodied his fingers with their pecking. These parrots live a long time. They might have been older than he was." On the last line of trees she stopped before one of the final cages. "I should take this pair of rock doves to remember him by."

"Go ahead."

She lowered the cage and carried it to her horse. Swift mounted up and led the way through the woods to General Gates's encampment.

A half-hour later, they passed through the picket of soldiers guarding the American camp and he delivered her to the tent where other women were staying. Swift went alone to see General Gates. "Alexander Swift, sir, reporting on a reconnaissance mission."

Gates was a British general who'd resigned his commission in 1772 to cross the Atlantic and settle in Virginia, where he became a friend of Washington. He was one of the few American generals who'd seen service in a regular army, and Swift knew that Washington valued him highly. He was of medium height with slightly stooped shoulders that made him appear older than his fifty years. Some said he was a better politician than a general, and the previous December he'd campaigned hard with the Continental Congress to be appointed commander of the northern army. Following an Indian attack and the brutal killing of a young farm woman, he was chosen for the position.

"I understand you had a meeting with General Arnold this morning," he said without waiting for Swift's report. "He has been relieved of his command."

"I know that, sir, which is why I've come to you with my report. A farmer named Franz Meuse has been killed by an Indian tomahawk. I found the body at his house."

Gates frowned at the news. "The Meuse farm is just west of the Freeman place, and it is well known that the British have enlisted the Indians to help them. I have a report on my desk that a peddler known as Foxy Foley is missing in the same area and may

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have stumbled upon an Indian war party. How long had Meuse been dead?"

"Less than an hour, I think. The body was still warm. His niece found him shortly before my arrival. Could you send a burial detail over there?"

"Not today. It could be a trap of some sort. But I will note it."

"The man had an apple orchard with caged birds hanging from the trees."

Gates nodded. "One of my scouts reported that. It seems very strange."

"His niece and I released them since there was no one to care for them."

"All right, Swift. Thank you for the report. If you see General Arnold, tell him he is no longer welcome here."

"I will convey your message, General."

He left the tent and crossed to the other end of the camp where he found Arnold drilling his troops. Presently the drill ended and the general came over to stand by him. "Where have you been, Swift?"

As they walked back toward Arnold's tent, Alex quickly told him of Franz Meuse's murder. "The tomahawk seems to indicate he was killed by Indians."

"You sound as if you're not certain," Arnold remarked.

"There were no signs that he'd put up a struggle. And if an Indian killed him, would he have left the tomahawk in the wound? Would an Indian war party have left all those birds hanging in their cages without taking some for food?"

Benedict Arnold pondered this. "You say there was a woman at the house."

"A niece, Selma O'Hara. She may be the bird lady you mentioned earlier. I brought her back with me to protect her."

"Where is she?"

"In the tent with the other women." Swift did not inquire about the others. He knew some might be wives following their husbands to the battlefield, while others might be mere camp followers or prostitutes. This close to the battle scenes, all were risking their lives. As they reached Arnold's tent Swift added, "General Gates gave me a message for you. He said you are no longer welcome here."

It was those unfortunate words that changed Benedict Arnold and perhaps the course of the war. "No man shall keep me in my tent today!" he cried. "I am tired of Gates's halfway measures." He went inside and buckled on his sword.

"What are you doing?" Swift asked.

"Leading the attack!" Arnold told him. Mounting his horse, he rode through the camp calling to his men. Many seemed ready to

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follow him gladly, though he had no right to command or give orders. Swift stood by helplessly and watched, knowing he was witnessing some sort of history.

Gates was out of his tent, shouting to his troops, but Arnold cried, "Victory or death!" and rode on.

"Major Armstrong, stop him!" Gates ordered a nearby officer. Armstrong mounted up and took off in pursuit, but it was immediately obvious that Arnold and his band of men would not be overtaken. He led the way two miles north to the redoubt on Bemis Heights, where the English Colonel Breymann protected Burgoyne's main column as it advanced again toward Freeman's farm. Arnold gathered up three more regiments along the way, but at first they were repulsed.

Back at Gates's camp, all was in an uproar. One of the camp followers, a husky young woman named Clare, came running up to Swift, demanding to know where her fiancé Major Armstrong had gone off to. "General Gates sent him after Arnold," Swift told her.

"He'll be killed!" she sobbed, sitting down in the dust to cry. "He'll be killed and I'll never see him again!"

Swift tried to comfort her. "I'm sure he'll be all right. Don't you have any other friends in the area?"

"I only know Mr. Meuse, and now he's dead, too. They say the Indians killed him."

That caught Swift's attention. He helped her to her feet and dried her tears. "Did you ever visit his farm, with his apple orchard full of birdcages?"

"Y-yes, I went there every week after his wife died. Sometimes, if it looked stormy, I helped him carry the cages into the barn."

"Was he always at home?"

"No, he often rode around the countryside watching the progress of the rebel armies. But then last week we had a terrible fight. He accused me of stealing his money and slapped me. I got angry, and we tussled. I pulled his hair and bit him but he threw me out and told me not to come back."

"Did he have any weapons around his house?"

"I saw a musket, but all the farmers have those."

"No tomahawk?"

She shook her head. "Nothing like that."

"Did you know his niece, Selma O'Hara?"

She nodded. "I recognized her in the tent when I saw the birdcage. She was at the house once when I came. I heard her telling the other women that the Indians killed him."

"Did you speak with her?"

The woman shook her head. "I stayed out of her way. She might have thought I killed him."

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"You might have had more of a motive than the Indians," Swift pointed out.

"Sure, we fought and he threw me out, but I didn't come back with a tomahawk and kill him. He wouldn't have let me in the house, certainly not with a weapon in my hand."

Swift left her and entered the women's tent. He found Selma easily by the birdcage above her bunk. She was talking with one of the other women but came over to Swift as soon as she saw him. "What news of Arnold?" she asked. "They say he rode out of here with a detachment of men, bound for battle. General Gates is in a fury."

"I know that, but it's about all I know."

Ignoring all military conventions, exercising command without authority, Benedict Arnold took charge of whatever brigades or regiments he came across. Like a madman he flourished his sword and charged into the thick of battle. British cannons fell to the Americans and were turned on Burgoyne's troops. General Gates saw none of it, for he had remained at his headquarters throughout the battle.

It was at this moment of victory that a British bullet found its mark and killed Arnold's horse. His left leg was broken beneath the falling beast. The enemy was in retreat but Arnold had to be carried from the field of battle.

It was about this time that a detachment of Gates's men, miles from the action, came upon a man who identified himself as the missing peddler Foxy Foley. His packhorse, with gently ringing bells, was loaded with Indian trinkets, headdresses, and weapons, and he was only too happy to receive an escort back to the American camp. "If they'd ever found me peddling those Indian things they'd have killed me," he told the officers at Gates's headquarters while Swift stood by listening. Foxy was a hairy middle-aged man and perhaps it was the hair that had earned him his nickname.

"A farmer named Franz Meuse was killed by Indians," Swift told him. "Did you travel near his farm?"

The hairy man turned to stare at him. "I don't think so. I'm new in this area."

"You'd remember it if you had. He had an apple orchard with birdcages hanging from the trees."

"Whatever for?" the peddler asked.

Before Swift could answer, there was a fresh disturbance from the other side of camp. "General Arnold's been wounded!" someone shouted, and several men came running.

"I'll be back!" Swift told the peddler and broke into a run himself.

He pushed his way through the ring of men around the canvas litter. Benedict Arnold's face was twisted in pain, and Swift could see the bone protruding from his crushed left leg. "My God, Swift,"

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he gasped when he saw Alex. "It's the same leg that took a musket ball at Quebec!"

"Just lie still. The doctor is on the way."

It was Major Armstrong himself who attested to Arnold's courage. "This man was a hero today. I saw him break through the British lines, leading his men without a thought for his own safety. He completely routed Burgoyne's troops at Bemis Heights, riding blindly into the crossfire with sword outstretched."

"Go tell General Gates that," Swift suggested. "This may be the perfect time to throw his troops into a full-scale assault."

The rest of the day was filled with activity. The encampment was fully alive for the first time since his arrival the previous day. The men were preparing for battle and the women were caring for the wounded. Though the sun was low in the west everyone felt sure Gates would order a full-scale attack by dawn. Already there were the occasional sounds of musket fire in the distance.

Swift saw Selma O'Hara making a purchase from the peddler and he followed her into the tent. "What did you buy?" he asked.

"This scarf." She held up a long wool cloth.

"Ready for winter?"

Selma laughed. "Not yet. I bought this to wrap around the birdcage so they would sleep instead of chattering all night. Even their coos can be annoying."

He watched her return to the tent and then went in search of Major Armstrong. The young officer was inspecting his men's muskets to be sure they were ready for battle. "Their red coats make them easy targets," he was saying, "even in the woods. Make every shot count."

"Major Armstrong, may I have a word with you?"

The officer frowned at the interruption by a civilian. "Mr. Swift, I am preoccupied."

"It is a matter of utmost importance which will only take a moment of your time."

"And what would that be, pray tell?"

Swift lowered his voice so the others wouldn't hear. "Who are the best shots in your regiment?"

"I have two men who are quite good."

"I need them both."

"You need them? My dear sir, I obey only the commands of General Gates."

Swift looked at the sun sinking toward the horizon and knew he had no time to waste. "Listen carefully, Major. You have these men's lives in your hands."

A bit later, with occasional musket fire still to be heard, Alexander Swift sought out Foxy Foley again. The peddler was packing his

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gear, ready to be on his way. "You'd best head south tomorrow," Swift advised.

"I know that."

"I told you about the farmer with the birdcages. Is that the sort of thing you might sell?"

"Birdcages? No. They're too big for me to handle, even with my packhorse. I couldn't take more than two a trip, and I only get up this way every few months. It would take me years to deliver fifty cages."

"I'd suggest you stay the night," Swift said. "I will speak to Major Armstrong about letting you sleep in one of the tents."

"Thank you," the peddler said, obviously pleased.

Swift walked across the campgrounds and entered the women's tent. Some were already asleep and he went first to Clare's cot to be sure she was all right. "I'm awake," she said, stirring a bit as he approached. "I heard musket fire."

"Everything is all right now," he assured her. "You can go to sleep."

He crossed to the other side of the tent, where Selma O'Hara's birdcage was delicately wrapped in its woolen scarf. "No cooing," he observed. "That scarf has done its job."

She nodded. "They are sleeping soundly."

"This is a trick of legerdemain I learned from a famous magician," Swift said, and before she could move he grabbed an end of the scarf and yanked it from the cage. The cooing doves had vanished.

"What happened to them?" she asked in alarm.

"I fear they're both dead," he told her with a sense of regret. "I had them shot out of the sky before they could carry your urgent message to General Burgoyne."

Selma tried to bolt from the tent but Swift held her fast until Major Armstrong and his men arrived. "Take her into custody," Swift told him. "I'll explain everything."

"You'd better do that. I have to report all this to General Gates."

A bit later, by the lantern light in Armstrong's tent, Alexander Swift started talking. "We have to go back to the killing at Meuse's farm."

"You're telling me the young woman killed her uncle with a tomahawk?" the major asked.

"No, as a matter of fact I doubt if she killed anyone. To drive a weapon like a tomahawk into a man's skull like that takes a good deal of strength. What I'm saying is that the dead man is not Franz Meuse, and obviously she must have known that."

"Not Meuse! How—?"

"Selma showed very little emotion after finding her supposed uncle brutally murdered. More important, the dead man was bald. A woman in our camp, who claims to be your fiancée Clare—"

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Major Armstrong snorted at that. "She is nothing of the sort!"

"In any event, Clare frequented the Meuse farm and told me she recently fought with Franz Meuse, pulling his hair. And the dead man's hands were without wounds, though Selma told me the birds pecked at Meuse's fingers, often drawing blood. No hair and no hand wounds. But if the dead man wasn't Meuse, why did Selma lie about it? The answer, of course, is those birds. Why did Meuse keep them in his orchard?"

"Because there were too many to fit in the house," Armstrong suggested.

"And why were there so many, and of so many different types? To hide the fact that many of them were rock doves, better known as pigeons. In Europe pigeons have been used for centuries to carry messages tied to their legs, homing in on their destination in a matter of minutes. I was suspicious of this when I remembered Arnold telling me General Gates feared that spies were reporting on our troop movements. Franz Meuse was an English spy who reported by carrier pigeon back to Burgoyne's headquarters camp. From there a rider could be dispatched to the front lines with news of our positions. I was suspicious of Selma's part in this, but I had to catch her in the act. Her only reason for bringing those two pigeons along was to warn Burgoyne one more time. She launched both pigeons with the same message of our impending attack, certain that at least one would get through. I saw her get the scarf from the peddler. When she wrapped it around the cage it wasn't to quiet the birds, but to hide the fact that they were gone. Happily I'd already persuaded you to have two marksmen watching for them."

"But who was the murdered man at Meuse's farm?"

"The peddler, Foxy Foley. Meuse himself killed him shortly before I arrived. He escaped through the back while Selma kept me busy out front. I thought I heard distant bells, like the bells on Foxy Foley's packhorse, as I approached the farm. We know Foley traded in Indian weapons among other things. He might have been showing Meuse an authentic tomahawk when he happened to question the pigeons in their cages. Perhaps he'd even noticed tiny message tubes attached to some of their legs. Meuse killed him and took his packhorse as a means of escaping, leaving Selma to send a final message to Burgoyne."

"Then she wasn't his niece?"

"I doubt it. She's not talking, but that woman Clare should be more than willing to identify the man calling himself Foxy Foley as the supposedly dead Franz Meuse."

She was, and he surrendered without a struggle.

Two days later the British had retreated to the heights above Saratoga, but Burgoyne paused there too long. Without the messages from his spy, his escape route to the north was cut off and

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the troops found themselves completely encircled by the Americans. On the morning of October 17th, Burgoyne surrendered. America had its first great victory of the Revolution.

Molly had listened with rapt attention to Alex's story. When he finished she asked, "What happened to Meuse and Selma?"

"He admitted the killing and both of them were tried as spies by a military court. Meuse was hanged and Selma was sent to prison. The crime was pretty much as I'd described it to Major Armstrong. While Meuse was examining the tomahawk, Foxy Foley made some comment about pigeons carrying messages. Meuse killed him, hoping Indians would be blamed, and when I arrived on the scene he escaped with the packhorse, planning to avoid detection until he could join up with Burgoyne's men. If Selma hadn't brought those pigeons along to our camp I might not have realized what was going on."

"And Benedict Arnold? He was a hero after all."

"At Saratoga, he certainly was. To this day he limps as the result of his leg wound. But something changed him. Money, perhaps, and a greedy second wife. In any event, he won the battle at Saratoga but almost lost the war for us with his treachery at West Point."

"Is there good and bad in every man?"

"Perhaps. I would like to think that Arnold now regrets those crimes against his country. If we ever meet again, I will ask him." ●

"No, I distinctly said, look for every nook and cranny.
Not for every crooked nanny!"

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Poet Relocation Program

by Victor Gischler

Visiting Professor Jay Morgan sat up in bed very slowly and tried to remember how he'd hung himself over. The slim girl curled under the covers next to him, a young female grad student named Annie, didn't wake. A whole semester had slipped away on his one-year contract at Eastern Oklahoma University before he'd struck pay dirt. She was nice, young, and fit.

Morgan was short and soft around the middle. His hair, sharpened black with a deadly widow's peak, was long, pulled into a tight ponytail.

Last evening's dark blur streaked with neon. The dance club on University Drive. Annie packed tight in denim and a black tank-top, red hair shaved close. First-year master's student, Sharon Olds wannabe.

Morgan found boxers on the floor, slipped into them. He crept to the kitchen, started a pot of coffee, and watched it drip itself into existence. He filled a mug, drank with his eyes closed.

The phone rang. He grabbed it quick. "Hello."

"Morgan? It's Dean Whittaker. We had an eight o'clock appointment."

"That's Wednesday."

"This is Wednesday."

Morgan's wrist watch said 8:37. "I'll be right there."

Victor Gischler's fiction has appeared in Houghton Mifflin's *Best American Mystery Stories 1999, Woman's World,* and elsewhere. His short story "Xs for Eyes" made the top-fifty list in *Best American Mystery Stories 2001.* Mr. Gischler, who teaches creative writing, takes a wry look, here, at the literary academic life at a university that we presume is quite unlike Rogers State in Oklahoma, where he works. His latest novel is *Gun Monkeys.*

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Morgan ran in and out of the shower, threw on black pants and a green Hawaiian shirt with a picture of a beflowered Elvis playing the ukulele. Brushing his teeth almost made him puke.

A flash of skin caught his eye as he passed through the bedroom. Oh yeah. The girl.

He cleared his throat. "I have to go."

Nothing.

"There's coffee."

More nothing.

"Lock up when you leave, okay?"

He pulled the door closed behind him, groaned his way down the sidewalk, and climbed into his twelve-year-old Buick. He pointed it toward Eastern Oklahoma University's main campus, muttering inventive curses at Dean Whittaker in which the word "bastard" figured prominently.

Morgan stopped at the secretary's desk on the way into the English Department. "We have any aspirin, Tina?"

"I have Motrin in my purse."

"Okay."

He took the bottle from her, spilled five pills into his palm, and swallowed them dry.

"There's a girl here to see you," Tina said.

Morgan turned, fear kicking around in his gut. He thought Annie had somehow—impossibly—raced here ahead of him, coiled to spring charges of sexual misconduct.

It was a different girl, compact, tan, round-faced, and fresh, black plastic glasses perched on the end of her nose, brown hair wild and shaggy. She bounced out of her chair and offered her hand to Morgan. He took it and shook, squinting at her, hoping to figure out what she was, if he was supposed to know her.

"Professor Morgan, I'm Ginny Conrad."

"Oh." Who? The voice was silky, familiar.

"I'm supposed to do a ride-along." The edges of Ginny's mouth quivered, hinted at a frown. "I'm supposed to follow you around. A day in the life of a poet—for the school paper. Remember?"

"Yes, of course I remember." No, he didn't.

Morgan rubbed his temples with his thumbs. He looked at Ginny again, tried to make himself interested. But she had too much on the hips, too fleshy around the neck and cheeks.

"This isn't a good day, Ginny."

A real frown this time, panic in the eyes. "But I have a deadline. My editor—"

Dean Whittaker leaned out of his office. "Morgan."

"Yeah."

Morgan left Ginny standing there, the girl flowing into his

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wake, "but, but, but . . ." like an outboard motor about to stall. Morgan pulled the dean's office door closed and cut her off.

"Sit down," Whittaker barked. He was a huge man with a big voice. His full black beard, barrel chest, and concrete shoulders made him look like a bear. Whittaker was also interim chair of the English Department until a search committee could find somebody new. Whittaker's dissertation had been on ladies' costuming in Elizabethan theater.

Morgan began to lower himself into the overstuffed chair across from Whittaker.

"Not there!" Whittaker yelled.

Morgan leapt aside as if he'd been hit with a cattle prod. He looked into the chair expecting to see a wet stain or some other reason for not sitting.

The other reason was an old man.

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't see—I'm just out of it today."

The old man scowled but said nothing. His thin, nearly transparent skin clung to his skull like wet tissue paper. Bald. Small, shrunken inside a brown sweater and a pair of khaki pants pulled up almost to his armpits. A red stone on his pinky finger the size of a doorknob.

"Take the seat by the bookcase." Whittaker glared.

"Sorry." Morgan squeezed in-between two giant bookcases. A narrow chair without armrests.

Whittaker sat, pulled at his tie, and fidgeted with a pencil.

"Morgan, this is Fred Jones. He's very generously donated enough money to keep *Prairie Music* operational for the next ten years."

"That's extremely generous," Morgan said. "Extremely."

And surprising as hell. The university had slashed the budget from under the third-rate literary journal, and it looked like they might have to go from a quarterly to an annual. Or maybe even scrap the journal altogether.

"Mr. Jones is a lover of fine literature and an amateur poet himself," Whittaker said. "He's been working quite hard on his own project, a volume of very personal poetry."

Whittaker was nailing Morgan to the back of his chair with his eyes, and Morgan realized he was supposed to say something about this but he hadn't a clue what it should be. He took a shot at it.

"That's great." He nodded, raised his eyebrows to convey deep sincerity. "Absolutely great. I wish more people would develop their creative sides."

This was a fantastic lie. The amateur poet was a cancer. Morgan's brief stints as an assistant editor for a number of literary journals reinforced this belief. Every day he'd arrive at the office

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greeted by a towering stack of hideous verse. *Everyone* wrote poetry. Schoolteachers and teenage girls and spotty adolescent boys who couldn't catch a girl's eye. You couldn't swing a bat without hitting a stack of bad poetry.

And the poetry came in like a flood. It arrived dozens of pages at a time, folded into sweaty, smudged thirds and overstuffed into flimsy #10 envelopes which burst at the corners. It arrived as a wad of scotch tape, or held together by string, handwritten in red pen, *i*'s dotted with little hearts.

"I said, what do you think of that, Morgan? Sound okay?" Whittaker eyed him, clearly annoyed.

"Uh . . . that might be okay," Morgan said. He hadn't heard a word. He was too busy picturing a group of beret-clad amateur poets being run down by a team of Clydesdales.

The old man shifted in his seat, cast his dark eyes at Whittaker, and spoke for the first time. "Is this guy on the dope? Don't saddle me with no dope-head." His voice strained like an old sedan trying to crank. A deep northern accent. New York? Philadelphia? Morgan had no idea, but the old man wasn't an Okie, that was for sure.

"You can count on Morgan, Mr. Jones. He's rock-solid." Whittaker shot a look at Morgan that said *or else.*

"That's right," Morgan said. "I was just deep in thought, trying to figure the best way to approach the project."

Fred Jones stood, joints creaking. "It ain't rocket science." He made for the door.

Whittaker and Morgan stood as well. Morgan opened the door for Jones.

Whittaker said, "Morgan and I will work out the details, Mr. Jones."

"Don't take forever," Jones said without turning. "I'm only getting older." And he was gone, shuffling out of the office and down the hall, an old man a lot bigger than his bones.

"For Pete's sake, Morgan, you could show a little interest." Whittaker flopped back heavily in his chair.

"I'm interested," Morgan said. *What the hell did I agree to?*

"Jones doesn't think so. You better act fascinated as hell when you see him again. It's not like folks walk in and hand the department a big fat check all the time."

Morgan wondered why he was going to see Jones again. He couldn't ask. Whittaker would know he hadn't been listening. "So how do you suggest going about, uh, the project?"

"The hell if I know. Just keep him happy. Maybe the old buzzard will put us in his will. Don't you have a class?"

Morgan looked at his watch. He did have a class. It had started three minutes ago.

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Outside the dean's office he saw Ginny the reporter coming for him with her hand raised. Fortunately, the department was crowded with undergrads trying to get their schedules changed before the end of the add/drop period. Morgan ducked into the flow of students, pretended not to see Ginny as he scooted down the hall. He didn't quite run, but he walked very, very fast.

"Del Prego." Morgan looked up from the roll sheet and saw a bored youth in a T-shirt and jeans lift his hand.

He went through eight grad students like that, all dripping attitude. One actually wore an ascot. A goddamn ascot! He called the last name on the list. "Annie Winter."

The girl from his bed.

Morgan marked her absent, then asked the class, "Has anyone seen Annie Winter?"

"I didn't see her in my eight A.M. class." The kid in the white T-shirt.

Was the girl still home in his bed? He supposed she might have a whale of a hangover.

Morgan would go over a couple of poems and then dismiss them early.

On the way out of the building he heard Ginny's high, clear voice chasing after him. "Professor Morgan!"

He ran to the parking lot, started his car, and almost smacked a coed backing out of his space. In his rearview mirror, he saw Ginny fumble with car keys and gallop toward a half-rusted silver Toyota. Morgan gunned his Buick, squealed his tires, and scraped pavement on his way out of the parking lot.

He tangled himself in traffic on Garth Brooks Boulevard but thought he could still see her a dozen cars back. He yanked the Buick down a side street, found himself in a maze of student slums. He came out on Old Highway 12 and made the long, slow curve back to the house he rented. He kept an eye in the rearview mirror, lips curving smug and satisfied when he didn't see Ginny's car.

Not today, junior newshound.

Morgan shuffled back into his little house. Not even eleven A.M. and he was beat, a little nauseated, skin slick with alcohol sweat. He'd begun the semester recklessly, unprepared. He didn't even have syllabi finished for his two undergrad classes.

Sleep. He'd sleep away the rest of the day and start fresh tomorrow. And exercise. Sit-ups. He'd start doing sit-ups. He was a wreck.

"You look like crap, Doc."

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Morgan leapt back against the door, yelped, a high-pitched bleat like a puppy or a little girl.

"Take it easy, Doc." It was Fred Jones. He perched like a ghost in the shadowy corner of Morgan's living room, a bony apparition in a billowy sweater, sitting in a wooden rocker but not rocking.

"You can't just barge into a guy's house," Morgan said.

"Whittaker sprang the deal on you," said Jones. "I understand that. You wasn't ready, so I figured I'd come talk to you one on one."

Morgan had almost forgotten. He'd agreed to participate in something and wasn't sure what it was. He started to object when the giant walked in from the kitchen.

"Hey, boss, you want a beer? Imported." He was six and a half feet, easy, shoulders carved of granite. His blue-stubbled chin was an anvil. He had sleepy eyes. He chewed slowly, half a sandwich still in his fist.

Jones craned his neck, looked up at the bruiser. "You know my doctor said to lay off, meathead."

Assorted protests tumbled in Morgan's brain. The one that came out was, "That's my beer."

"Your cheese went bad," the giant said. He looked mournfully at the rest of the sandwich, then finished it in one bite.

"I can't digest dairy," Jones said. He handed Morgan a manilla folder filled with loose paper. Thick. "How long to look at those?"

Morgan opened the folder. Poetry. Tons of it. Handwritten in feeble, shaky scrawl. "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" He felt hungover-sick and confused. His stomach boiled.

Jones leaned forward, frowned, put his gray hands on his knobby knees. "Dammit, man, are you on the dope? You can't seem to focus on what we're doing here. I'm getting impatient." He pulled a handkerchief out of his shirt pocket, shook it open, and blew his nose. "By the way, you got a dead girl in your bedroom."

"What?" Morgan felt hot in the face. His ears buzzed. He took halting steps toward his bedroom.

"Hey, Doc." It was the giant.

"I'm not a doctor. I have an MFA from Bowling Green." He was trying to think.

"I just wanted to tell you—"

"Don't tell me anything. Just shut up a second." He felt dizzy, blood pumping in his ears, mouth pasty. Did he just tell that hulk to shut up? What had happened to the girl?

"What's the matter with you?" asked the old man.

Had Morgan done something to her? No, some kind of misunderstanding. But he couldn't feel his legs. Head . . . swimming . . .

The giant said, "I just thought you'd want to know that there's this chubby girl looking in your front window."

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Morgan turned. Ginny Conrad had a hand cupped against the glass, trying to see into the dim living room.

The room tilted. Morgan's mouth fell open, his jaw working but nothing coming out.

Darkness.

Morgan's eyes focused on the giant kneeling over him.

"You fainted."

"I didn't faint," Morgan said. "I'm not feeling well."

"You look like you're gonna barf."

"Look, Mr.—who are you?"

"Bob Smith."

Morgan sat up. "Where's Fred Jones? I want to know—wait a minute. Fred Jones and Bob Smith?"

"The boss went to get help. He says we got to smooth over some of your problems for you."

Morgan swallowed a belch, rubbed his head. "The dead girl."

"And the live one." Bob jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the rocking chair in the corner.

Ginny sat forward, intensely interested. "Professor Morgan, will you please tell this enormous wad of muscles that I know you?"

Morgan said. "She's a reporter for the university paper."

"I know," Bob said. "We searched her."

"They took my notepad and my tape recorder," Ginny said.

Morgan climbed to his feet, swayed a little, then headed for the bedroom. "Back in a minute."

Ginny made a little disgusted noise. "Professor, what's going on? This guy won't let me leave."

"Just shut up a minute, okay?"

He kept his eyes averted from the girl in his bed and went to the bathroom. He splashed water in his face, leaned on the sink. He closed the door and sat on the toilet.

What in holy hell was he going to do? After that business with the provost's daughter at UNLV two years ago, Morgan was lucky to be working at all. Another disgrace might relegate him to a community college in backwoods Mississippi for the rest of his career. He hadn't published a collection in seven years. He hadn't published a single poem in two. A dead coed would seal his fate.

A knock on the bathroom door startled Morgan. "Yes?"

The old man pushed his way in, frowned down at Morgan like he was looking at a dumb little kid. He handed Morgan an empty pill bottle. "Found this on her side of the bed. Looks like she couldn't handle her dope. You give this to her?"

"Of course not." She'd overdosed. Pills on top of the alcohol. Crazy.

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"Come on," said Jones. "I've got some plastic. Let's get her out of here."

Morgan followed him into the bedroom.

Bob had Annie on her side, a big roll of clear plastic over his shoulder. It was an awkward arrangement. Annie's arms flopped.

Ginny stood on a chair, hovered over the bed, and pointed at the corpse. "Not like that, you idiot. Spread the plastic on the other side of the bed, then roll her onto it."

"What's she doing in here?" Morgan's voice had climbed two octaves. Almighty God, Morgan realized, was finally getting him. An old man with reams of tattered poetry. A fearless reporter ready to expose his scandals. Plagues upon Egypt.

"We'll handle that later," Jones murmured in his ear. "Did you get a chance to look at any of them poems?"

"No!"

Jones shrugged. "Sure. You got bigger worries. Maybe this weekend."

Bob wrapped Annie in the plastic, sealed her up with duct tape.

Ginny still stood on the chair, fists on her wide hips. "Why do you need the plastic anyway? She wasn't bleeding or anything."

"Routine," Bob said.

"Would you shut up," Jones said. "This ain't routine. We've never done this before."

"Right, boss."

Jones nudged Morgan with a pointy elbow. "Get her feet."

"What?"

"I can't carry her with my back. Grab the feet."

Morgan took Annie by her plastic-bound ankles, Bob at the other end. Morgan's breathing went shallow. The girl was heavy. They made sure nobody was looking, then quick-walked her out to the trunk of an old Plymouth Fury. Jones explained that they'd swiped a car specifically for this errand.

Morgan turned green as he listened. Sweat on his forehead.

"There's two shovels in the backseat," Jones said. "There's a peach orchard six miles south of town. Take the dirt road and bury her in the middle."

Morgan choked. "Me?"

"For chrissakes, Doc, I can't be involved," Jones said. "I'm in a very delicate situation. Besides, she's your dead girl, not mine."

"But—"

"You'd think you'd be grateful I was fixing this up for you."

"But—"

"Make sure you ditch the car someplace out of the way when you're done."

"But—"

"And don't worry." Jones jerked a thumb at Ginny, who watched

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from Morgan's porch. "We'll take care of the kid." He made a trigger-pulling motion with his finger.

"No!" Morgan's eyes bulged. "Let me worry about her."

"Want to do it yourself, huh? Sure, put her in the same hole as the other one." Jones slipped something cold and hard into Morgan's hand.

Morgan looked. A little blue-metal revolver with a stubby barrel. "What the hell is this?" He'd wanted to sound tough and outraged, but it came out like a squeak.

"It's a .38. You said you'd handle her."

"Right." He didn't dare argue. He'd take Ginny with him and figure out what to do with her later.

Morgan waved Ginny into the Plymouth. He took the keys from Jones and climbed in behind the wheel. The car's interior reeked of stale cigarettes, and he told Ginny to roll down the window.

As he pulled away, he heard the old man call after him, "Don't forget to look at them poems."

They were a mile from the peach orchard when Ginny spoke.

"They wouldn't give me back my tape recorder, but I have my notepad."

"This will not be a newspaper story," Morgan said. "You must know you can't say anything about this to anyone, ever." And just how would he enforce this? How do you shut up a chatty undergrad newspaper reporter? The old man's revolver hung cold against his thigh in his front pocket.

"I know. It wasn't your fault, right? I mean, you'd be totally ruined if they found out. I mean, with a student and everything. Not that *I* find it offensive, but a lot of the establishment types like to maintain this artificial hierarchy."

"Right."

"Besides, I figure if I help you, you might be able to help me, right?"

"Maybe."

"I asked for this assignment specifically because I wanted to speak to you," Ginny said. "What I really want to be is a novelist."

Maybe Morgan would shoot her after all.

He turned the Plymouth into the peach orchard. The narrow road petered out, and he found himself zigzagging among the trees. He parked in an arbitrary spot. He and Ginny took the shovels and started digging.

Morgan started sweating again, rings under his armpits, stomach queasy. He hadn't done anything this physical in a long time. He stopped digging, leaned on his shovel. His chest heaved with short breaths. "Okay, good enough."

"That's way too shallow," Ginny said.

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"It's fine."

"I'm telling you, it needs to be deeper. One good rain and up she comes. All that topsoil will wash right downhill."

Morgan sighed. He looked at the shovel, back at the hole. They kept digging.

When Ginny was satisfied, they muscled Annie out of the trunk and dropped her facedown into the hole. Ginny grabbed a shovel and started scooping in dirt.

Morgan thought about Ginny. Jones had made it clear what he wanted done, but Morgan had no intention of killing the girl. Still, she was a time bomb. Morgan's hand slipped into his pocket, fist closing over the revolver's handle.

Ginny turned, saw him watching her. "What is it?"

"Just thinking." He let go of the gun, put his hands on his hips.

She searched his eyes, moved toward him. "I'm not going to say anything."

"I know."

She stood very close to Morgan, her breasts brushing his belly. "I want you to believe me."

"I believe you."

Ginny shrugged, lowered her eyes. "Maybe we can seal the deal. Some kind of show of trust."

Her hand slowly traveled the length of his inner thigh.

Morgan cleared his throat. "I think we can work something out."

Her hands were very soft. She tilted her head up, offered moist lips.

It took two weeks for Morgan's nerves to sink back into place.

He taught his classes. He joined a gym and had even been twice. His graduate workshop was coming along well. He'd overheard one student tell another that he'd heard Annie Winter had run off to join the Navy. Where had that come from? *Don't ask.*

Ginny had been to his apartment twice to reassure him she wouldn't say anything. They'd made love, and each time he'd woken to find her gone.

Friday. He sat at his little desk at home. It was a mess, so he started cleaning and found an unfamiliar manilla folder. He opened it.

It was Jones's poetry.

"Hell."

Something caught his eye, and he read. A good line here and there. He read two or three, came to one that might work with some edits. The old man had decent instincts, smooth with images. Nothing too didactic. The poems must have been in chronological order because they improved as he went along. He pulled out two

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near the bottom and began marking them with a green pen. As Morgan critiqued each poem, he came to a horrifying realization.

The old man was good.

His images were fresh and energetic; savage, raw, and gritty without being overly gruesome. They didn't pander. His voice was rugged, straightforward, and American.

Morgan was sick with jealousy but couldn't pull himself away from the old man's work. Outside, the day slipped into evening, the weather turning sour and the sky growing dark. The wind kicked up. A little rain. Morgan switched on the tiny desk lamp and kept reading.

The weather worsened so he didn't hear when Jones walked into his house, stood over him at the desk, and put the gun to his forehead.

Morgan felt his sphincter twitch. He was going to die.

"You stupid punk." Jones shook the pistol at him. It was an automatic with a silencer. The old man dripped, the gun glistened wet. "You said you was going to take care of the girl and here I find she's walking around campus. Do you know what kind of position I'm in? I can't have this dumb kid opening her yap."

"Sh-she won't say anything." Morgan fought not to cry. The barrel of the gun was gigantic.

"Don't yank me off, you dumb egghead. She's a girl. Girls can't help blabbing their big fat mouths all over creation."

"Don't kill me."

"Shut up. Sometimes you people just don't understand—"

He looked down at his poems spread across Morgan's desk, plucked one from the pile with wet, bony fingers. "You wrote on these?"

Morgan nodded.

Jones looked at the changes. "Better."

"Yes."

Jones pulled up a chair, scooted close to Morgan, and shifted the gun to his other hand. He pointed to one of the poems where Morgan had crossed out the word *is* three times. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's a *be* verb," Morgan said. "They're weak."

"What do you mean?"

Morgan explained, and the old man understood.

"Are you going to kill me?" asked Morgan.

"No."

"What about Ginny Conrad?"

"You banging her?"

"Yes."

Jones scratched his head, exhaled. Tired. "That's okay, then, I guess. But I'm going to keep an eye on her."

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"Thanks."

"What about these things?" Jones meant the poems.

"They're pretty good, Mr. Jones."

"Okay."

Morgan said, "How about twice a month? We'll talk about these and whatever new ones you bring."

"Okay," Jones said. "I'll bring donuts."

The semester ended.

Morgan had almost finished packing up his office. A few books left on the shelves. He'd already turned his grades in, and Dean Whittaker had already been by for the perfunctory handshake and mumbles of "good job and good luck."

And Morgan had absolutely no leads on a creative-writing position for fall. The job lists had dried up, and nobody owed him any favors. An old grad-school buddy who tolerated him fairly well had whispered something about teaching composition at LSU. Better than nothing.

The phone rang, and Morgan answered.

"How's tricks, Professor?"

"Just fine, Mr. Jones."

"I got a letter from *The Chattahoochee Review.* They took one."

Morgan grinned. After fifty-two rejections in a row, Fred Jones had placed his first poem.

"I'm eager to keep working," Jones said. "I got a whole fresh batch to show you."

"Sorry. My contract's up. Believe me, I wish I could stay."

"I guess you didn't check your mail yet today."

"No."

Jones laughed, the wheezing sound of trampled bagpipes. "I'll talk to you later." He hung up.

Morgan went to the department mailroom, found his box half full. A letter from SUNY, Fredonia, caught his attention. He opened it.

It was from the head of the English Department. It was direct and clear. A sudden and unfortunate accident had rendered their resident poet unable to teach for the upcoming school year. There were strong hints that the temporary position Morgan was being offered would develop into something tenure-track if the department's poet didn't come out of the coma.

Morgan wasn't sure how he felt about this, but he went back to his office and printed Fredonia apartment listings off the Internet.

On his way out of the office, Ginny Conrad chased him down, shouting his name and waving a piece of paper. "I've been offered an assistantship to an MFA creative-writing program in New York."

Morgan stopped walking, looked at her. "Fredonia?" ●

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The Amontillado Club

by James Powell

A story that pays homage to Edgar Allan Poe is always a happy addition to our May issue, for each year on the first Thursday in May we distribute the May magazine to attendees of the MWA's Edgar Allan Poe Awards Banquet. Not only does James Powell's story allude to Poe, it concerns an organization (and an awards dinner) that mirrors the MWA. James Powell is a Canadian who lives in the U.S. ¶

That year the Mystery Writers of Canada held their awards dinner in Toronto at the King Edward Hotel. Afterward some members stayed on and could be recognized in the bar by nametags bearing the MWC logo, a daggerlike icicle dripping blood, and beneath it the printed words "Hi, my name is . . ." The bushy-eyebrowed man turning from the bar with a brandy glass held snugly in each palm had completed his tag to read "Lorne Humphries."

He carried the two drinks over to a table in a rather dark corner where McKay Kincaid sat waiting with impatience on his square, jowly face. Kincaid never bothered to fill in his nametag, expecting everyone to know who he was. And in this he was quite right. For twenty-five years Kincaid's Inspector Horace Egg of the RCMP and his Indian sidekick, Goodman Two-Shoes, had marched arm-in-arm through the pages of the country's detective fiction. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's TV series *Egg of the Mounted* had delighted the provinces as it was now delighting BBC and Australian television viewers. Yes, Kincaid was famous. He was also an arrogant human being and a pretentious bore.

Kincaid acknowledged the drink with a grunt, adding, "I hope this word or two you want to have with me isn't about my review of your latest effort in *Quill and Quire*. A bad review is better than no review at all." He paused before adding, "Let me throw my cards on the table." (This last was Kincaid's favorite expression. When people saw him coming they said, "Amscray. Here comes that damned McKay Kincaid looking for a table to throw his cards on.")

"The fact is," confessed Kincaid, "I've never liked your stuff. But I've been up-front about it. No sneaking about the bush. I think

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your books are . . . rubbish. Always have."

"It's not about the review. What's done is done."

"Good," said Kincaid. "Good. Glad you're taking it like a man. For a change. By the by, I hear you've lost your American publisher. Sounds like your title was prophetic."

Humphries raised an eyebrow at the remark. His last detective novel, *A Snowball's Chance,* had sold even less well than its predecessor, *Crimes Blacker Than Hockey Pucks.* Then he got down to business. "Have you ever heard of the Amontillado Club?" he asked Kincaid.

"What the hell's the Amontillado Club?"

"When I was starting out," said Humphries, "there was a bunch of us who thought the short story was the future for detective fiction." He laughed at himself. "We called them detective novels with all the balloon juice let out."

Kincaid snorted. "But the balloon juice is where the money is."

Humphries nodded. "I said we were young and idealistic. Anyway, we knew there's a trick to everything, and we were all bent on finding the trick to writing detective stories."

"Well, you weren't going to find it anywhere within a mile of 'The Cask of Amontillado,' " said Kincaid, pounding the table with the tip of his index finger. "Poe may have fathered the detective story, but that wasn't one of them. It's horror, straight and simple. Remember the wine vaults beneath the castle with the niter hanging like moss on the ancestral crypts?" He shuddered. "A nice ending, though, when what's-his-name chains the other guy to the alcove wall and then bricks him up inside, with the guy begging for his life as the final brick slides into place. That I liked."

Humphries looked at Kincaid for a moment without speaking. Then he got back to what he was saying. "One day back then it hit me like a ton of bricks: A detective story is one you work out in your head from beginning to end like Poe's Amontillado story. But then you write it starting from the end and going backwards. Here, let me show you.

"Picture Venice in November," Humphries began, describing the canal waters, gray and shrouded with autumn mist. "Through the gloom comes an official gondola, and striking a heroic pose in the bow is Commandatore Fosco Millefiori of the Polizia Speciale, a handsome figure with longish steel-gray hair combed back over his ears and an impeccable suit. Millefiori's empty coat sleeves flap out behind him, for he is of that race of men who wear their overcoats across their shoulders.

"The gondola reaches the brightly painted mooring posts of the Palazzo Montresor, with the family coat of arms above the door. Millefiori leaps nimbly ashore on elegantly shod feet. He knocks. A beautiful young matron with two young children clinging to her

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skirt opens the door. Millefiori introduces himself using his full title and is ushered inside. There he meets Signor Bartolo, the present owner of the palazzo, a fussy little man in a silly jacket.

"That morning, Bartolo explains, the workmen enlarging the rec room in the basement because he wished to install something called an "apingaponga" table, broke through into a small bricked-in alcove where they discovered the skeleton of a man chained to a wall.

"Millefiori asks to see the remains. Bartolo leads him downstairs and beyond the heavy plastic set up to keep the demolition dust from the rest of the house. A work crew stands drinking wine and speculating on their discovery. The remains are a heap of bones and rags of pari-colored cloth. The skull wears a decaying conical cap topped with bells.

"Millefiori shoos the workmen out like a farmer's wife driving her geese before her. Then he examines the alcove. He finds a large clay bottle called a pipe, once used to store fortified wines. It smells of a fine Amontillado. But he finds no sign of a trowel or a mortarboard. A man does not chain himself to a wall and commit suicide by bricking himself up in an alcove without leaving his tools inside with him. Investigating outside the alcove, Millefiori finds the dusty tools used to imprison the murdered man.

"Returning to the body, he squats down and asks if he might borrow the expensive silver pencil in Bartolo's jacket pocket. When the man obliges, Millefiori uses the pencil to lift the jingling cap from the skull. Around the inside sweatband of the cap are the words 'Made in China' and 'Souvenir of the Venice Carnival, 1958.' Dropping the cap, he offers the pencil back, but Bartolo recoils in horror. The commandatore shrugs politely and pockets the pencil.

"Then he rubs his jaw and wonders out loud, 'Wasn't nineteen fifty-eight the year Fortunato, the celebrated wine expert, vanished from the face of the earth?'

" 'The editor of the monthly *Amontillado Today?'* replies Bartolo. 'Yes, I believe it was.'

" 'And wasn't there talk at the time of his having an affair with the wife of the previous owner of this very palazzo, Prince Montresor?'

" 'No,' replies Bartolo, still smarting from the loss of his silver pencil, and pleased to correct the commandatore in front of the workmen, who had drifted back and were following the conversation like a tennis match. 'We purchased our humble home from Signor Rinaldo Grossi. He was the one who purchased it from the prince and moved the contents of the Montresor crypts to San Michele cemetery.'

"Millefiori bows at the correction. 'The police have this matter well in hand,' he says. 'Please disturb nothing until our crime-scene people arrive. I will see myself out.'

"In the foyer of the palazzo, Millefiori lingers over his farewells to

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Signora Bartolo, assuring her that the grim discovery in the basement of her charming home will be removed within the hour. Then he kisses her hand and pinches the cheeks of the children, sighs, and, posing for a moment in the doorway, he makes his departure.

"Back at the police station Millefiori orders his subordinates to locate Prince Montresor. He is quickly informed that the prince had emigrated to Canada several years before to live with his son, a director of the nuclear power plant in Pickering, Ontario.

"By the time Forensics reports that the fingerprints on the trowel were indeed those of Prince Montresor, Millefiori has instituted a request for the man's extradition from Canada and, after consulting with his superiors, receives permission to fly to Canada to witness the prince's arrest and to personally escort him back to Italy.

"Millefiori is standing there in the snow when the Ontario Provincial Police surround the sumptuous house on Pickering's Linden Drive and an officer who speaks Italian mans a bullhorn to command Montresor to give himself up. 'Eh, Montresor, *la comedia e finita, eh?*' "

Humphries interrupted his story to turn to Kincaid. "I call your attention to the first 'eh,' which is mock Italian, and the final one, which is mock Canadian," he said.

"Duly noted," said Kincaid.

Humphries concluded his story. "A moment later, Montresor smashes the glass in an upstairs window with his pistol barrel and begins to sing the aria 'Come and Get Me, Coppers' from Rossini's opera, *The Thieving Tax Collector.* In the gunplay that follows, Montresor is killed.

"When Millefiori returns home, his Polizia Speciale colleagues remark that he has changed somehow. It is as if the commandatore had lost his dash on that snowy far-off Pickering street. But, indeed, all the Canadian winter had taught the man to do was to put his arms in the sleeves of his overcoat and button the buttons."

Humphries paused for a moment before adding, "When my friends heard my discovery about writing detective stories and my version of Poe's tale, they were so excited they named us the Amontillado Club, with me their first president. But we knew we had to keep my discovery a secret. Otherwise, everybody would start writing detective stories and prices would plummet. So we took this solemn oath, swearing to kill any of our number who revealed my discovery to anyone outside the club."

Kincaid shook his head. "What a bunch of losers."

Humphries gave a rueful laugh. "That was a long time ago, when I was very young, long before I fell under the spell of balloon juice."

"Yes, it does weave a powerful spell," agreed Kincaid. Then his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Hold it," he said. "Does this Amontillado Club still exist?"

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"Members come and members go, like yours truly here," said Humphries. "But sure, the club's still around. It's in the phone book."

"Then I think you'd better buy me another drink," said Kincaid. "Otherwise, I might just call them up and tell them you let the cat out of the bag and broke your solemn vow." Kincaid's voice hardened. "Well, you have, haven't you?"

Then Kincaid giggled. "I mean, *The Moonstone* and getting pursued by a bunch of Hindu Brahmans is one thing. But imagine being tracked down by a bunch like the Amontillado Club. I can see them pooling their money to rent a pistol, buying a bullet, and drawing lots to send someone TeeTeeCeeing it over here to get you." (This last was slang for the Toronto Transportation Commission, which ran the city's excellent subway system.) "Even if you lit out now, you'd still have men in cheap shoes peeking in your windows looking for a chance to gun you down."

Laughing, Kincaid took a pull at his drink and dabbed his eyes with his handkerchief. "Oh, I do like a good laugh," he said. "Let's get together like this on a regular basis with you buying the drinks and me telling you what I really think of that crap you write. And maybe I'll give you an errand or two to run. Like picking up my suits at the dry cleaners. Or anything else that comes to mind. And you'll do it chop-chop unless you want the Amontillado Club lurking behind every snowman you pass on the street."

Kincaid's words were slurring now. He frowned and seemed confused by what was happening. Then he said something Humphries couldn't understand. Making a great effort, Kincaid managed to say, "Get me my drink."

Humphries got up quickly and went over to the bar. He ordered a single brandy and took a few slow sips before returning to the table. Kincaid was sitting as he'd left him, his eyes wide open with alarm, his breath coming quickly. Humphries sat down, raised the man's wrist, and then let it flop back onto the table.

"The drug in question only affects the motor functions," he explained. "You can see and hear. You just can't move. It will wear off in fifteen minutes or so. But that'll be too late. I drugged your drink right after I called the Amontillado Club to tell them I'd spilled the beans and where they could find me. Of course I meant where they could find you."

Humphries smiled and his eyebrows took a devilish shape. He removed his nametag and held it up in front of Kincaid's eyes. Tossing the man's blank nametag under the table, Humphries replaced it with his own. Then he moved Kincaid's chair, pointing the drugged man in the direction of the fire door in the corner. "In a few minutes one of those losers from the Amontillado Club will come through that door," he said. "And he's going to shoot the man wearing Lorne Humphries's nametag."

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Humphries looked at his watch. "Well, time to go. Every good boy deserves an alibi." But as he started to get up, Kincaid made a faint noise as if struggling to speak. Humphries sat back down and put his ear to the man's lips. "Come again?" he asked.

Kincaid made the sound again. But it was still unintelligible, like an urgent, faraway voice speaking from the other side of a brick wall.

Humphries rose and gripped Kincaid's shoulder. "No whimpering," he said. "Take it like a man."

He went back to the bar, where he was still sipping his drink and chatting with the bartender when a shaggy, wild-eyed, down-at-the-heels young man in jeans with one hand buried inside a baggy corduroy jacket came through the fire door. He crossed quickly to Kincaid, fired his weapon, and disappeared the way he had come.

Humphries led the rush over to the table where Kincaid was slumped in his chair, blood running down his shirt front.

Leaning over the body, Humphries quickly recovered his nametag and shouted, "He's killed McKay Kincaid, the writer! Somebody call the police."

After the police questioned the witnesses to Kincaid's murder, Humphries was back out on King Street, heading homeward, where his bags were packed and waiting for him. After all, by tomorrow the Amontillado Club people would know they'd killed the wrong man and the chase would be on again. But that was all right. They'd never find him in time. Besides, in the same newspaper where they read the news, they might also find the large advertisement Humphries had placed that very afternoon. In it, under the headline "Want to Write Detective Stories?" he had outlined his discovery along with his retelling of "The Cask of Amontillado."

Soon everybody would be walking around working out mystery stories in their heads. Schoolteachers would be thinking mysteries instead of working on their lesson plans. Librarians would be thinking mysteries instead of putting books back on the shelves. Yes, even the guy at the nuclear power plant in Pickering, whose only job was to make sure that little arrow on the gauge never, never moves over into the red zone, he would be thinking mysteries, too.

So that's how the world will end. Not with a whimper but a bang. But what a glorious one! Humphries wished he could be a fly on the wall of the spaceship from Alpha Centauri when it arrives to investigate the disturbance in a primitive corner of the Milky Way. He imagined the extraterrestrial astonishment when they discover that the immense mushroom-shaped cloud is made up entirely of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch sheets of double-spaced prose and stamped, self-addressed envelopes all rising up and up toward the final frontier, the outer limit of the balloon juice. ●

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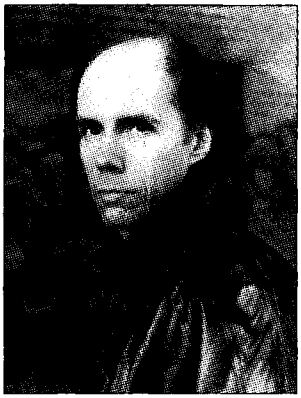
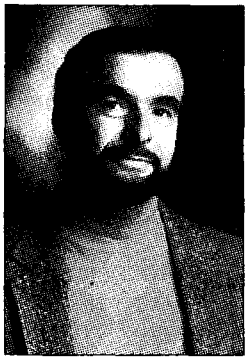
Edward D. Hoch



Jeffery Deaver



Doug Allyn

2002 READERS AWARD

2002's Readers Award voting showed a shift from the preceding several years in favor of the traditional mystery. Stories with classical elements—twist endings, impossible crimes, and closed circles of suspects—did especially well. First place goes to Jeffery Deaver, an undisputed genius with the twist ending, for the stunning "Without Jonathan," a story that plays expertly on the sometimes unwarranted assumptions readers make. The author of eighteen novels and numerous short stories, Mr. Deaver also finds time to edit the occasional short story anthology, most recently the Mystery Writers of America's collection *A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime* (Berkley). His own fiction has reached a wide audience, through television and film as well as the printed word. Four Deaver novels are currently under contract for feature films, and two earlier books formed the basis for the movies *The Bone Collector* and *Dead Silence.* Just off the presses is another gripping thriller in the author's bestselling Lincoln Rhyme series, *The Vanished Man* (Simon & Schuster), and coming up next month in *EQMM:* "Copycat," a new Deaver short story. Our congratulations to an exhilaratingly resourceful writer for this, his third, *EQMM* Readers Award.

Less *is* sometimes more when it comes to the *EQMM* Readers Award, for writers who publish with us as often as Edward D. Hoch does may be handicapped by the split of their fans' votes among their many stories. But even an eleven-way split couldn't stop Mr. Hoch from taking second place this year with "The Problem of Bailey's Buzzard," a crackerjack whodunit in the Sam Hawthorne impossible-crime series. With nearly 900 published short stories to his

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credit, Mr. Hoch has been named a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America. He is an Edgar Allan Poe Award winner and a recipient of two Anthony Awards from the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention. He is one of the very few short story writers whose readership extends around the world, and he is perhaps the only living writer who has made his living almost exclusively on the publication of his short stories. Crippen & Landru publishers have brought out several collections of Hoch stories over the past few years: The most recent, *The Iron Angel and Other Tales of the Gypsy Sleuth,* was published early this year. Hats off to a pro!

"Telephone to Forever," your choice for third place, is on the cozy end of the spectrum of work produced by the multi-talented Doug Allyn. The Edgar Allan Poe Award-winning author has produced nine mystery series that we know of (others are no doubt under way) plus innumerable non-series works, which include, at the other end of the cozy-to-hardboiled scale, the hard-hitting cases of private eye "Ax" Axton. Though he is an accomplished novelist, Mr. Allyn has achieved greatest recognition as a short story writer: No one we can think of, apart from the late, great Stanley Ellin, has ever received as many awards and award nominations for best short story as Doug Allyn. The Michigan author is also a five-time winner of the *EQMM* Readers Award. He has an incomparable knack for creating characters readers care about, and a keen understanding of the times in which we live. Mr. Allyn's most recent books are the short story collection *The Hard Luck Klub* and this summer's release, *The Burning of Rachel Hayes,* both from Five Star Press. Our congratulations to one of *EQMM*'s finest.

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . . . . . "The Last Story" by Charles Ardai

Fifth . . . . . "Courier and Ives" by Edward D. Hoch

Sixth . . . . . "The Theft of the Wedding Doves" by Edward D. Hoch

Seventh . . . . . "Moody's Blues" by Hal Charles

Eighth . . . . . "Heroics" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Ninth. . . . . "Mine Hostage" by Neil Schofield

Tenth. . . . . (tied) "To Live and Die in Midland, Texas" by Clark Howard
"Old Eyes" by Nancy Pickard

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A MODEL MURDER

by Jeffery Ewener

EQMM is delighted to be the first to provide commercial publication to Canadian Jeffery Ewener, whose work has appeared twice before in small literary magazines. Mr. Ewener makes his living by writing—through the advertising industry, corporate events, and speeches, as well as some print and broadcast journalism. He once wrote a weekly political satire column for the *Toronto Star*, and then did the same thing on CBC Radio. But fiction, he says, is what he always wanted to do. ¶

She would have knocked on the door. She says in her statement she did and I believe her. I'm going by the kind of person she was, or at least the kind I took her for, but I think I'd got a pretty good handle on her by the time we closed the case. She was a thorough, capable woman, systematic, attentive to detail. Before they married she had been her husband's executive assistant. That's a combination secretary-nursemaid-therapist-troubleshooter which top executives need to manage their day-to-day business lives for them, since their own attention has got to be completely devoted to their main job—wrestling the greased pig of corporate politics—or they'll be out on the street in a week. An executive assistant is judged entirely by her *(usually* her—sometimes *his)* ability to make her boss's problems go away, no matter where they come from or what shape they take. The job demands little in the way of professional qualifications; everything is in the performance. But an EA who falters, even once, is useless—and there's always plenty of people standing by ready to replace her. Mrs. Lake was not replaced. On the contrary, Jim Lake convinced her to apply her skills in an even wider field—that of his whole life—while ensuring that if she played her cards right, she need never be replaced at all, till death did them part. Which, a few moments before she knocked on that basement door, it already had.

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She would have tried the door to see if it was locked, though it was always locked—but that was the sort of thing a person *would* do, so she did it. Probably called his name a couple of times—"Jim? *Jim!*" You never knew, someone could have been passing by, maybe the dry cleaner was approaching the door at that very moment, someone might have heard, or, more importantly, *not* heard if she didn't do it, so she did that, too. A very thorough woman. She probably even hesitated for just that minute someone would hesitate to wonder what to do next, to decide whether she ought to do what she already knew perfectly well she was going to do, what you or I would have just gone and done. But my bet is, she waited it out. Then she went out the back door and up the outside steps and down the smooth grassy hill to where the stone fence and the juniper hedge don't quite meet and there's a faint path worn where the Lakes and the Sobelmans sometimes cut through to call on each other, and she cut through and walked along the wide lawn beside the Sobelmans' pool and climbed the steps to the cedar deck that could seat forty people and knocked on the back door.

Danny Sobelman didn't tell us how delighted he'd been to answer the door and find her there. He didn't have to. Any man of the hetero persuasion would be thrilled. Stephanie Lake had just turned forty-one and she wore those years like a Cavalli gown. To the male eye she glowed with a kind of energy embodied—a sensuality so refined it was almost spiritual, a wisdom so deep it was completely physical.

A woman's eyes, of course, are tuned to a different frequency. When Mrs. Lake looked in the mirror I suspect she saw threads of gray running through her thick smoky-blond hair, little shadows playing about the startlingly pale blue eyes. No man would notice how her skin was starting to lose its tautness, its perfect smoothness, but she would. We judge ourselves harder than anyone else can, but Stephanie Lake, I think, would be a particularly stern judge. In her quick, efficient body there was no room for sentimentality.

Even now, seen through the screen door of Danny Sobelman's Forest Hill home, self-cast in the role of the anxious wife, Mrs. Lake had not entirely lost her air of being equal to any situation, and her distress was probably all the more evident because of it. The slightest narrowing of the eyes, a squeezing of the brows, one or two purposeless sidesteps or flutters of the hand would have been enough to convey an unprecedented disturbance of her famous calm.

"What is it, Stephanie?" said Sobelman the moment he opened the door. "What's wrong?" It's in his statement.

She gave no sign of surprise (at least that Sobelman noticed) at

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finding him home, though it was unusual for him to be there in the afternoon. His wife, Bunny, was the one she must have expected—Wednesday was her day off from bridge and yoga and Pilates and the Friends of the Art Gallery luncheon series. At first Mrs. Lake was probably pleased. All those years in the sexist corporate world had probably persuaded her that a successful businessman would make a more convincing (and maybe more easily manipulated) witness than a "mere" housewife. But no sooner had she told Sobelman her fears than Bunny popped out of the house anyway. Though she wasn't exactly dressed for the purpose—in a filmy pink robe and little lacework pumps with stiltlike heels—she made it clear that Danny and Stephanie weren't about to go anywhere without her. That gave Mrs. Lake two witnesses, which might be better than one, or might be worse, but at any rate couldn't be helped. She thanked both of them with great sincerity.

So back the three of them went to the Lakes' house and the basement door, and this time Danny banged on it and called Jim's name. She told him about the bolt on the inside. He asked about other doors and learned there were none. Windows, crawlspaces? No. And at some point Sobelman, unable to ignore the challenge to his masculinity posed perpetually by Stephanie Lake's serene feminine competence, realized he was going to have to break in the door.

Mr. Physical, Danny Sobelman isn't. He's a shipping broker, a business in which the ability to calculate advantages to several decimal points is the key to success, and he had been very successful. At this time he was a tall, gangling man in his late forties, and *he would have been a tall, gangling kid thirty years before.* He grew up in Israel, so I guess he must have served in the army, but I don't know how he got through basic training. Nor did I ever get the impression, interviewing him, that he watched a lot of cop shows or went in for any sort of macho stuff at all. I have to figure the idea of smashing his way through a solid wood door must have appalled him.

But you can't call the cops or the fire department just to open a door. A locksmith would have been no help. There was actually no lock, only a bolt in a bracket on the other side—on this side there was a swinging hasp fitted with a padlock for when the occupant was out. The hasp was wide open now, the padlock closed over the empty bracket, locking nothing to nothing. But the door wouldn't budge.

Somehow they had to get inside. That was obvious to everyone, even without the worried wife standing there quietly squeezing her fists. She had heard a noise, she said, a bang or a pop, it sounded like. Maybe he fell over, hit his head, had a stroke, a heart attack. He could be lying there right now, hurt. And if he

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wasn't, why wasn't he answering? Jim had never done anything like this before.

Jim Lake had been a pretty predictable man, at least since graduating in Business from Queens University, which was as far back as we checked. His interests, his politics, his haircut—none of it presented any surprises. He could talk comfortably and with seeming authority on any subject going—the Maple Leafs or the Blue Jays, the Canadian dollar, public health insurance, taxes, the Middle East, Margaret Atwood's latest book—and though every word of it could be found in the pages of the previous week's *Globe and Mail* newspaper, from which he drew his opinions like water from a tap, his fellow businessmen found his conversation sound, uncontroversial, and reassuringly in line with what they had been thinking themselves. They liked him. They admired him for his easy sense of humor, for his big bluff curly-haired good looks and his attractive wife thirteen years younger than himself, and for his business success, to which they felt almost duty-bound to contribute. Lake was working on the financial side for one of the big property developers when he met his wife, but shortly after their marriage he struck out on his own. For the next ten years he managed investments in commercial real estate, setting up limited partnerships of doctors and architects and orthodontists and buying up strip plazas and low-rise office buildings in places just outside Toronto like Aurora, Whitby, and Orangeville. What with fees and commissions and the occasional piece of the action, he had accumulated enough for a very comfortable retirement four years earlier, at the still-vigorous age of fifty. And then, all of a sudden, Jim Lake stopped being so predictable.

Mrs. Lake had encouraged him to retire early. It was what he'd always said he wanted to do. He enjoyed business, but it was something he did for money, and once he had himself a big enough pile there were plenty of other things he'd rather be doing. Looking back, his wife realized he had never actually said what those things were. But she had been so clear on the sort of things *she* wanted to do—Italy, Paris, and New York were some of the places she wanted to do them in—that she had just assumed they both wanted the same things. And maybe Lake had, in fact, thought that the things Stephanie talked about were fine, and were things he wouldn't mind doing, too, at least in the absence of anything else that really interested him. But then he discovered something that did interest him, something, in fact, that fascinated him and even, as the pop-psychology people would say, obsessed him. To his thunderstruck wife it must have seemed, and she tellingly used this phrase herself in her statement, that her husband had "fallen in love." No moonstruck teenager ever fell harder.

And to keep his new love private, Lake had kept the door behind

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which he pursued it closed and bolted. Poor Danny Sobelman nearly broke his shoulder trying to get through it. Then he switched tactics and nearly broke his foot. Then Mrs. Lake remembered the hammer she had up in the kitchen cupboard and they tried smashing the door in with that, then tore away at the frame with the claw part of the tool. It took a long time and they made a mess of that door. But finally they exposed enough of the bracket, and loosened it enough from the doorframe, that Sobelman could go back to his Mike Hammer routine and kick open the door.

From there they could see the whole of the room. It was a vast, low-ceilinged area, lit up like a film set. It took up almost the entire basement of the Lakes' large Forest Hill mansion, and it was filled to the walls with what Jim Lake, at the age of fifty, had fallen head over heels in love with.

Trains. Model trains. The room was a little land of trains, a tiny transportation empire under artificial sun. There were trees and hills and rockfaces in pink and gray, a miniature town with its little outdoor station, there were signal boxes and water towers and a picturesque old steam locomotive parked on a spur line. And there was lots and lots of track—track on curves and straightaways, trestles and yards and sidings, single, parallel, and multitrack lines, so much track that when you tried to follow it with your eyes the ties created a strobe effect that made you stop and blink. It was all laid out on a continuous platform about four feet high and anywhere from one to four or five feet wide around the perimeter of the room and diagonally across the middle. The track itself seemed wide—it was, in fact, about one-and-a-quarter inches across, from rail to rail, a gauge known to hobbyists as "O." At this scale the engines and boxcars and coaches scarcely seemed like toys. Each one was a foot long or more, four inches high, and built with such exquisite detail that they looked complete in themselves, as if they weren't scaled-down models of something else, but had their own perfect function in the world, and were not intended to represent anything but themselves.

The three intruders stood awkwardly in the doorway and stared. The Sobelmans had never seen the room before. Bunny said later she felt a chill, and gathered her thin silk robe together at her throat. They could hear a *tickety-tick* sound from somewhere but for a few seconds saw nothing, until the big diesel engine popped out of the tunnel near the mining operation and sped towards them, pulling a freight train nearly twenty feet long. It took the wide curve in front of them at speed and rattled away, right through the little station, without stopping for the little people on the platform, and out of town and through the switchyards and over the trestle and all around the miniature hills and forests

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of the countryside until it ducked back into the tunnel again. There was no stopping it, around and around, *tickety-tick*. It was the only sound in that silent world, the only movement in all that tiny, painstakingly detailed stillness. It gave Bunny the creeps.

The tableau was broken when Danny Sobelman, mystified, bent down and scanned the room below the four-foot-high platform. At the same instant, Mrs. Lake moved around him in an attempt to get through the doorway herself. She denies this. But Sobelman was very clear about it and I believe him. I believe Stephanie Lake needed to get into that room, needed to be the first one in, and Sobelman was already checking out the floor.

In fact, he'd finished doing that. "Stephanie," he said, straightening up and blocking her way, "you'd better stay here."

"I'm not staying here," Stephanie replied, like a person used to getting things done—making an observation, not a protest.

"No, Stephanie," he said firmly, and when she didn't appear to comply he called for assistance. "Bunny?"

Mrs. Sobelman jumped in. "Come on, honey. Just wait a minute. Let Danny have a look first." Against the two of them, Mrs. Lake couldn't very well insist. So Danny Sobelman crawled under the platform into the open area in the middle of the room and discovered Jim Lake's corpse all on his own.

The body was at the far end of the room, spread-eagle on its back, the head pointing away from the door. At first Sobelman thought Lake's throat had been cut, there was so much blood down the neck and collar. Then he noticed that the top of the head was shiny—then that it was bloody—then that a lot of it was missing.

At the sound of retching, Stephanie Lake shot past the distracted Bunny and rushed into the room. Bunny went after her.

By the time they got to him Danny was white as paper, but he had managed to stand up and turn and face the women as they rushed up.

"Stephanie," he said, "you really shouldn't—"

"My God! Jim!"

"Oh shit," said Bunny.

Sobelman may not be the guy you call for when there are doors to break down, but he's a solid man in a crisis. He whipped out his cell phone and ordered up the cops and an ambulance, all the while devoting attention and concern to the suddenly bereaved widow. He was already getting over his initial shock. Bunny, too—despite her frilly silk robe which had fallen open to reveal her short but fulsome white form beneath—was made of stuff stronger than the eye could see. After a moment of holding herself up and taking deep breaths she had thrown an arm around Stephanie and hugged her and she and her husband were energetically sug-

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gesting that they should all move outside until the police could arrive. As they damn well should have.

Stephanie, too, was bearing up well—better, in fact, than a policeman likes to see in the widow at the scene of a suspicious death. She refused to leave the room. She showed no signs of wanting to throw herself on the corpse of her husband. She didn't curse God, or scream, or even weep softly to herself. She didn't do anything—"There was nothing to be done," she said later, quite sensibly—but neither would she leave the room.

Detective Constable Ben Ricketts and I got the call, and made it to the house in record time. We had been in Ben's car, heading south on Avenue Road, or Oriole Parkway, or whatever the hell it is at that point, on our way downtown from my Yonge-and-Eglinton apartment, when they caught us. All we had to do was turn right into Forest Hill and head south past a few dozen mansions till we got to the Lakes'. So they were still having this little tussle about leaving the room or not leaving the room when we rang the doorbell.

That galvanized them, as you might expect. It wasn't just the three of them anymore. Everybody looked at everybody else. Then Bunny said, "I better let them in," and left.

Sobelman and Mrs. Lake were alone now. He was standing near the head of the body facing Mrs. Lake and the door, she was next to its splayed feet. Sobelman shook his head sadly.

"Stephanie, I'm so sorry . . . " He must have been looking at her—the only other person there to look at was a bloody corpse.

Mrs. Lake nodded her head and gazed past him. Then her eyes focused sharply. She jabbed a finger at the floor at the back of the room, on the other side of the track platform.

"Danny! What's that?"

Sobelman looked but saw nothing, and would have said so but for the urgency in her voice. Her head to one side, she was pointing between two worktables. Jim Lake was a very well-equipped workman, but not a tidy one. Attached to one of the tables was a small lathe, its surface sprinkled with metal and wood shavings. The other held a drill press, and behind it an upright section full of little drawers containing bits, wrench and screwdriver attachments, screws and bolts of various sizes, and a number of variously sized tools that looked like they might come in handy once a year.

On either side of these worktables were more of the same—some with equipment for soldering and welding and whatnot—all of them covered in half-constructed boxcars, engines, electric motors, wheels, rails, axles, rolls of solder, sheets of light wood or plastic, strips of green felt, little plastic trees, wire of various gauges, thin metal rods, sheets of decals, miniature jars of paint with tiny paint-

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brushes. It was a wild, junglelike profusion of do-it-yourself creativity, of ideas that had sprung to life and either survived to completion or else succumbed to inability or waning enthusiasm while some new idea sprang to life and took its place on the work schedule.

The area of the floor where Danny Sobelman went looking—like the floor everywhere—was littered with creative dead ends, and bits of scrap wire and plastic and shavings which had been swept impatiently off the work surfaces above. It was not immediately clear to Sobelman what Mrs. Lake had been pointing at. It could have been lots of things. So there was nothing to do but crawl under the track and go over there and look around, which he did.

"I don't know, Stephanie . . ." he began, looking this way and that through the rubble. Then he stopped. His glance had fallen on a point along the wall immediately behind the lathe. Lying on the floor was a gun.

Sobelman, who had not completely recovered from the shock of finding his next-door neighbor dead on the floor, was shaken by the sight, and no wonder. Guns, especially pistols, are not common in Toronto, despite what the chief tells the media every year around budget time. A lot of people have them, but equally a person could probably live here his whole life without ever seeing a handgun except on TV—and it'd have to be an old rerun to see the antique heater Sobelman found. Even an ex-soldier like Sobelman was taken aback. Then he tried to reach it. He bent over and stretched, but found it too tight a squeeze. So he tried to move the worktable—lathe and all—but it was heavy and in a position too awkward to get any leverage on, with the wall on one side and the railroad on the other. Sobelman put one foot against the wall and gripped high up on one leg of the table and began to heave. He managed to move it about six inches out from the wall, I'd say, at which point Ben Ricketts boomed out, "Hey!" like the voice of God, and scared him nearly out of his skin.

Ben had already managed to intimidate Mrs. Sobelman on the doorstep, by his very presence. She'd opened the door and found herself looking at his tiepin.

"Police," I said, and flipped my ID in front of her to give her something to look at besides Ben. Ben is very large, very black, and very talented. He's a lay preacher at his church, and moonlights as a baritone for little operatic societies around southern Ontario. He has a voice like dark honey that can break windows if he wants it to.

Mrs. Sobelman fluttered a little and led us downstairs. I stopped to examine the shattered door and doorframe while Ben continued into the room. I looked in at his bellow.

Ben was already moving toward the back of the room. Unwilling

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to fold himself up small enough to crawl under the train line, he managed to discover a hinged passageway, where the platform could be lifted up. He had to put it back down in a hurry, as the 2:56 barreled on down the line toward him.

"Must that thing be on?" he asked irritably. Mrs. Lake looked up. She was in the corner of the room with her back to Sobelman, which meant she was facing in Ben's general direction, and appeared to be noticing him for the first time. She was obviously not easily distracted.

She said, "Oh yes. Of course," and moved to her left, past the body, to the adjacent corner, where an electric control station sat on a wraparound formation of the railroad platform. The operator could sit there on the swivel chair—like an ordinary office chair, but as tall as a barstool—and enjoy a clear view of the whole system. Mrs. Lake touched a switch and the *tickety-tick* sound abruptly stopped, along with the train.

Ben, plainly relieved, addressed himself now to Mr. Sobelman, with formal Jamaican politeness. "Please do not touch anything or move anything or trouble anything at all. My name is Detective Constable Ricketts, this gentleman is Detective Sergeant Manx, and this room is now the scene of an official police investigation."

Sobelman looked sour and rubbed his back, as though he'd pulled something when Ben yelled. He pointed behind the lathe and said, "Well, you better investigate *that.*"

Just then a pair of uniforms thundered down the stairs and into the room. They looked a little freaked-out that Ben and I were already there.

"One thing at a time, if you don't mind, sir," Ben said to Sobelman. "Could you all please come out of the room and give your names and place of residence to these officers?" For instilling docility in the citizenry, there is no device more effective than bureaucratic routine.

I stood still and took in the room. I was just inside the irregular circle of the railroad. Along the back wall and running halfway up the sides were the worktables and other furniture. In front of me lay the mortal coil of Jim Lake, looking thoroughly shuffled off.

The rail line was still. Most of it never moved anyway—the little people waiting endlessly on the platform, the silent town, the dead countryside, the tall structures and slag piles of the frozen mining operation. The only thing moving was the little steam locomotive sitting on its spur line near the mine, chugging away. A thin cloud puffed out of the smokestack, jets of steam huffed around the wheels. The platform was very wide there, decorated with trees and little hills and a few alternate routes connected by switches to the main line, which at that point ran along the outside, hard by the wall. I went over for a closer look.

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"Sarge?" called a uniform from the door. "This is Mrs. Stephanie Lake, widow of the deceased."

She came solemnly into the room. I gave her my name again, and my condolences. She nodded.

I turned back to the locomotive. "I thought this was an *electric* train set?"

She sighed as she came closer. "My husband was a big believer in authenticity. One day he hoped to have a complete live-steam system fully operational."

"Bruno? Come now." Ben was squatting beside the lathe table. I moved over and crouched down beside him and looked where he nodded.

I whistled. "A Colt .45!" I squeezed past the table, carefully inserted my pen in the muzzle, and backed out holding it high, like Little Jack Horner.

"I thought a Colt .45 was a cowboy six-gun," said Ben. "Not an automatic."

I shook my head. "Semi-automatic. Probably the most popular handgun ever invented. Manufactured all over the world. U.S. Army officer's sidearm for, jeez, probably the whole twentieth century. Popular with officers in every other army, too."

"How old's this one, you think?"

"Pretty ancient. But they hardly changed the design for decades, so it's hard to tell."

"Can it fire?"

"It's *been* fired," I said, sniffing. "Maybe recently."

His eyes scanned the floor. "Where's the brass?"

"Gotta be somewhere."

Ben looked back at the late Jim Lake. "*That* one fired it? How in hell it end up over here?"

I shrugged. "Colt .45's got quite a kick. Say he's standing there, about where the wife is now. Puts it up to his chin. *Boom.* Flies back, gun flies out of his hand. It strikes the wall, drops to the floor out of sight."

Ben made a soft sucking sound with his teeth, which in the Jamaican language can mean anything from thoughtfulness to confusion to irritation to contempt. He rose to a standing position and I followed—more slowly, my knees having a few more miles on them. He was already examining a hole in the wall where a chip had been knocked out of the concrete-block surface. He looked over his shoulder at me.

"Strikes the wall and drops to the floor," he quoted. I nodded, pretty impressed with myself. I looked around for Mrs. Lake. She was standing next to the steam locomotive. She was dropping little bits of something into the firebox. The idleness of the activity

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seemed somehow to add to her dignity—like a refusal to be humbled in the presence of death. I moved closer to her.

"What are those things?"

She glanced up at me. Her eyes were suddenly so blue, I nearly jumped. "Just some kind of treated pressboard," she said. "Like those fireplace logs you buy in the store."

"Only little."

She smiled and picked up another one. "Very little. This is a solid-fuel steam engine, a perfect 1-3-0 replica locomotive, handmade by grown men who ought to know better. It'll burn anything. Paper, wood, even those little pieces of coal." She pointed to a pile of what looked like black gravel, near to the mine. "I have to admit, I kind of like it. It's the only thing I like in the whole room."

I poked at the coal—a pile of black chips of rock, slightly greasy to the touch. "Can I put one in?"

She nodded. "Sure! You need a good fire going, but this one ought to do."

There was a scoop next to the coal pile. I shoveled up a little heap, carried it to the door of the firebox inside the engineer's compartment, and tossed it in. Like Casey Jones's fireman.

"Better let off a little steam," she said. "That lever there."

I tripped it with a fingertip. A miniature *whoosh* of steam blew out the top of the long boiler. Very gratifying.

"If you don't do that," I asked, "will the boiler blow?"

"Oh no. There's a safety valve. The lever's just for fun."

I laughed. "I'm starting to see the appeal of it all."

"That's your Inner Little Boy talking."

We looked at each other for a long moment. The faintest smile was enough to make her face glow. I hated to bring us back to business. "But you don't like it?" I said at last. "All this."

End of smile. Her blue eyes, changeable as the sky, turned gloomy. "I don't like what it did to Jim, how it changed him. It was like booze for an alcoholic. Trains were all he cared about. Anything else—he forgot anything else existed."

"Anything else like what?"

"His life. The world." She glanced at me and smiled briefly with embarrassment. It pulled me closer to her. She dropped her eyes to the steam engine. "His marriage."

I said nothing for a while. Then I asked, "Where'd the gun come from, Mrs. Lake?"

"It was his father's. He brought it back from the war."

"Which war?"

"Europe. Normandy, Holland. He was a major, I think, in the Canadian army, and some kind of hero. Jim was pretty proud of him."

"What did he use the gun for?"

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"Jim? Or his dad?

"Jim."

"For sitting in his drawer, mostly. Sometimes we'd take it up to the cottage and shoot it. For fun, you know. Target practice."

"A dangerous toy," said Ben in a deep, stern voice as he joined us. The preacher in him coming out. "That is a restricted weapon!"

"Where's the cottage?"

"We have some property up near Peterborough."

"You go up there often?"

"When we can. I was up there last weekend."

"Both of you?"

"Just me. Jim had a model-railroaders convention in Syracuse. I went by myself."

"Did you take the gun with you?"

"God no! That's *Jim's* toy—" She caught her breath. In a moment she had control of herself again, and shook her head abruptly. "—not *mine.*"

"Did he have it up there recently?"

"If he did, I didn't know about it. I thought it was still holding down his socks."

"Did he have a permit for the weapon?" This was Ben, going by the book. "And to transport it?"

As we learned later, Jim Lake didn't have any kind of permit at all. There was no record of the gun anywhere. So much for modern computerized policing.

The doorbell rang. Mrs. Lake went rigid.

"That'll be the ambulance, or the coroner." She moved as though to answer it. "Could I ask you to stay here, Mrs. Lake? Because it's an official investigation. Detective Ricketts can let them in."

I'm not sure what I was thinking at that moment. I'm not usually such a stickler for procedure, so something must have already awoken my suspicions. In a few minutes they'd be standing up screaming.

"Hey-hey! It's the Ben-and-Bruno Show!"

I winced and cut him short. "Dr. Ashwari, from the coroner's office," I said, making the intros, "this is Mrs. Lake, wife of the decedent." The decedent I indicated with my thumb.

Sadiq Ashwari is a kind soul. He froze in his tracks and stared at Stephanie Lake, sick with embarrassment—and a sick coroner is a rare sight. "Mrs. Lake," he said at last, "I'm deeply sorry for my apparent jocularity. These officers are friends of mine. Let me assure you, you have my deepest sympathies."

She nodded. "Thank you. I understand."

Sadiq got furiously busy. I knelt down beside him.

"Contact wound?" I murmured.

Sadiq shook his head instantly. "Have to get him back to the

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shop and clean him up. But at least ten centimeters—up to half a meter."

"A couple of feet."

Sadiq grinned. "In dinosaur terms, yeah. But it's just a guess."

"But definitely not contact."

"No star pattern," he said, pointing to the neat round wound under the chin, "no contact. But it could still be close, a few centimeters."

"Couple of inches."

"Ha! Call it a fraction of a cubit."

I stood up. Ben Ricketts moved to my side. "What's the call?" he asked.

I leaned close to him. "Suicide," I said, "it ain't."

Ben turned and stared at me.

I nodded. "*She* did it."

"How?" he whispered. "Look at that door, man! The bolt was pushed across on the inside. If she shot him, how the hell she come out of the room?"

Well, that was the question, wasn't it?

"I don't know," I admitted. "But he didn't shoot himself. Look at the way he's lying. He was facing the front of the room and the shot knocked him backwards. And the gun flies *past* him, and hits the back wall?"

"So? Was you said the Colt packs a kick. And he was in no shape to keep a grip on it."

"Yeah, but then I remembered the law."

"The *law?*" Ben prides himself on his encyclopedic legal and regulatory knowledge. But this time I had him.

"Newton's law," I said, grinning. "Every action has an equal and opposite *re*action. So if *he's* flying toward the *back* of the room, the *gun* should have flown toward the *front* of the room."

Ben screwed his face up painfully. "Pretty thin . . ."

"Well, it's enough to get started. Keep the witnesses on ice. Crime-scene team's to go over every inch of this place. And I want a couple of female uniforms for body searches."

Ben blew out his breath in a long slow stream. But he got onto the Division and started putting in orders.

"Sergeant?"

I turned to find Mrs. Sobelman in the doorway. I walked over.

"Are we done here?" she asked. "My husband and I are a little busy this afternoon."

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to stay a little longer, Mrs. Sobelman. Regulations, you know. Death by violence . . ." I shrugged helplessly.

She wasn't buying. "But . . . we can't!" She gave her husband a

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look that brought him running. "We have some very important business to take care of. It can't wait!"

"Now, Bunny," her husband said. "I don't think *one day*'ll make all that much—"

"*Timing* is the *key,* Danny!" she said a little wildly. "You *know* that!"

I held up my hands. "If we can all just cooperate, we'll have you out of here soon as possible."

In a little while the room was filled with investigators. I was in a huddle with Ben, Sadiq, and a constable I'd never met named Janine Chen—a pretty woman with classic East Asian features but with a Jamaican accent thicker than anything I'd ever heard out of Ben.

"Right now the scenario is the wife shot him and dropped the gun behind the lathe. How else could she have told Sobelman where to find it? After the killing she leaves the room and somehow bolts the door from the inside. Janine, we're looking for anything she could have used to do that—thread, fishing line, maybe even a powerful magnet of some kind. You'll have to look pretty close."

She smiled grimly. "We'll check every pimple on the woman, sir."

"Excellent, but *maximum* discretion! Mrs. Lake hasn't been charged with anything. We haven't let on it's anything but a suicide. She's still the grieving widow. Try and give the impression this is all for her own good—a suicide watch, more than anything."

She nodded and went to work.

"You know," Sadiq began slowly, "I'm not a hundred percent behind your reasoning vis-à-vis the gun."

"Hmm?"

"Well, I'm thinking, suppose it wasn't the kick of the gun that set it flying. Maybe it flew out of his hand when he fell backwards. He throws his hands over his head," Sadiq demonstrated with his own arms, "throws the gun away, too."

"Which hit the wall and dropped behind the lathe."

"I'm only saying it's possible."

I shrugged. "I'm not saying it's not."

"And another question, Bruno," Ben jumped in. "If she shot him, why she go and drop the gun all the way over there at all?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, why there? Why not right here beside the body? The woman trying to fake a suicide, why she want to go fancy it up so?"

I had no answer for that one. "Well," I said doggedly, "how'd she know it was behind the damn lathe? She sure as hell couldn't see it from where she was standing, or anywhere in the room, not

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without getting down on all fours. But she knew it was there, therefore she must have put it there.

"And another thing," I carried on, "where's the shell? It should have landed on the floor near the body, but it hasn't turned up. And the wound! What sort of suicide puts a gun under his chin and holds it way down here?" I laid my thumb against my breastbone, the index finger pointing in the general direction of my chin. "If *you* were doing it, wouldn't you press the muzzle right up against your skin?"

Ben shrugged. "If it was me going to do it, I wouldn't do it at all. Man in that frame of mind, how the hell we know what he's thinking?"

Sadiq was nodding vigorously. "I think Bruno's got a good point. If I was a suicide, I'd certainly push it right up against the chin." I gave him a grateful smile, but it went away as he continued. "Thing is, if I was a *murderer* I'd do the same thing—make sure I pressed it close. You don't want to take a chance on your victim jumping around. So either way . . . " He made an equal-balance gesture with his two palms and shrugged.

All my loopholes were closing up—or opening so wide they'd let a trainload of possibilities through. But if we were wasting our time here—and the Department's money—everyone knew I was the one who'd have to take the heat. So it was up to me to make the call.

"There's always different explanations that'll cover the facts," I said, truthfully enough. "But the big fact here is, the whole thing stinks. I don't know what it is we're looking for. But whatever it is, we're going to find it."

So we started grinding. Janine and her colleagues searched the witnesses. Others went over the room downstairs. Sadiq's people took about a thousand photos and carted off the body, along with bloodstains and other medical evidence. Physical evidence got bagged up and ferried downtown with a rush order attached. Ben and I deposed the witnesses. Then we deposed them again. And then, for good measure, once more.

They called us downstairs when they found the shell.

"Looks like somebody stepped on it," said the constable, an old Englishman, nearly as old as I am, named Brant. "Then they must have kicked it under that cabinet." He indicated another D-I-Y system of little drawers off in a corner. There was about a one-inch clearance between the bottom and the floor.

I stared at him a minute, not trusting myself to speak. When I thought I could keep my voice flat I said, "One of *our* people did that?"

Brant lifted a hand to his grizzled temple and scratched uncomfortably. "Can't really say, sir. I suppose it's *poss*ible. . . . "

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"You sup*pose.*"

"Or it could have been one of the witnesses, sir. Before . . . anybody got here."

"Why would they do that?"

Brant shrugged with irritation—the frustration of a spit-and-polish man forced to work in such conditions. "Well, look at this place, sir. It's not a workshop, it's a pigsty! Bits of metal and scrap everywhere. You can hardly move your foot without stepping on some piece of crap. Anybody could have done it, even the wife."

"Even the wife," I repeated. Somewhere in my head the first tumblers were beginning to roll over, but I was a long way from picking the lock. I couldn't remember just where Mrs. Lake had been standing when I first looked into the room, and that bothered me. "Okay, Brant. See what else you can find."

He turned away. I added, "Good work, Constable."

"Oh! Thank you, sir!"

Janine Chen came up to me, looking embarrassed. "Sarge?"

"Don't call me 'Sarge,' Janine."

"Oh! Sorry, sir . . . "

"It's all right. What were you going to say?"

"The Sobelman woman?"

"Bunny."

"Yes, sir. She starting a riot upstairs, sir. Says they must reach home this minute, or they're too late already. Hell of a commotion, sir."

"Aw, jeez. What the hell're they up to that's so important?"

"They making a baby, sir."

"What?" I goggled at the woman. Behind me Ben boomed out a laugh that shook the walls. "*What* did you say?"

"She been having trouble getting in a family way, sir. She told me all about it. They been trying for a couple years, and now the doctor gone and put them on some kind of . . . schedule."

"Schedule?"

Janine had turned fire-engine red. She leaned closer and tried to whisper, but the whole room was hanging on her every word. "Different times on different days, when doctor say she most ready for him to . . . you know, plant the seed."

"Plant the *see*-eed!" Ben's laugh boomed out again and he leaned on a worktable to catch his breath. His cheeks were shiny with tears.

Janine pushed past me and started berating Ben in a rapid high-pitched patois.

When I managed, finally, to get Ben to stop laughing and Janine to calm down, I sent her upstairs with orders to let the Sobelmans hurry off home.

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"Timing," Ben gasped, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief, "timing is everything!"

I shut my eyes. "Shit," I said.

"Eh?" said Ben. When I opened my eyes he was frowning at me. "What's going on?"

"The timing," I told him. "She didn't shoot him and *then* drop the gun behind the lathe. She planted the gun *before.* That's why she put it *there*—so *he* wouldn't see it before the trap was sprung!"

"What kind of trap?"

"Any kind of trap!" I was getting snappish. "A trick of some kind."

"Or a *real* trap!" Ben cried, grinning like a maniac. "You've got it, man. The trap was a second gun, or something *like* a gun."

"Like a zip gun."

"Exactly!"

I shook my head. "She's not a machinist. How's she gonna make herself a zip gun?"

Ben laughed in my face. "Look round you, man! A child could make a gun in here. Get the plans off the Internet. Cut it, drill it, weld it, polish it up nice-nice!"

He was right. The room was like a little armory.

"So she never had to get out of a locked room," I thought out loud. "He came in later, alone, and bolted the door himself. And *both* guns were already in here with him."

I could almost see the pieces coming together in the air. But there were gaps between them yet.

"So." I turned my hands over. "Where the hell is it?"

"Hmm," said Ben, looking around. "She couldn't have taken it out of the room . . ."

I finished the sentence for him: "But she could have taken it apart and scattered it *around* the room!"

"Trigger, barrel, shell, firing pin, spring—all in some kind of frame or holder or something."

"Now all part of the general junk in here."

We stared at each other for a split second. Then we got everybody back in the room.

It wasn't like a search anymore. It was a cataloging. Now that we had some idea of what we were looking for, we began to collect and categorize every piece of metal, plastic, wood—every piece of crap, basically—anywhere in the room. It was like an archaeological dig, every piece sorted according to the area of the room in which it was found and the type of material or shape.

And in some ways we were very successful. Too successful, in fact. We turned up enough little springs and potential triggers and firing pins to outfit a home-handyman army. Some bits were nice and shiny, others were dirty and scratched up. I was getting a

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headache wondering what to do with it all. Should we run nitrate tests on everything? How feasible was that? And how useful? If we came up with nothing, what would that mean? She could have wiped it off on her blouse, a tissue, anything. And what could her lawyers make of results like that?

Then Ben got the ballistics report on his cell phone.

"Definitely the bullet was fired from the Colt."

"Oh hell," I said.

"But they couldn't be sure about the cartridge case."

"*What?* You can't fire a bullet without a case!"

"Well, the thing was all scratched up so. Said it seemed to have the action marks—meaning it had been loaded and ejected from the gun—but the firing-pin impressions didn't seem right. It was all too mashed up to say for sure, so they call it indeterminate. We'll have the printed report in the morning, with all the mumbo-jumbo, but that's the upshot."

It was almost there. I could feel it.

"Janine!" I called.

"Bruno?" she answered from across the room. "Uh, sir?"

"Go upstairs and see if Mrs. Lake would like a cup of coffee or anything. Start up a little chat and find out everything about their property up by Peterborough. Find out if they have a swimming pool up there. Or maybe one of those decorative ponds with Japanese carp in them. Any kind of clean, compact body of water away from the neighbors."

She was back in twenty minutes. They had a pool.

"So what?" Ben said.

"You've never been in the ballistics lab," I deduced.

"Well, orientation, you know."

"You fire the test shots into a tank of water. The bullets go maybe five, six feet and drop to the bottom. You end up with perfect little test subjects, not a mark on them except what they got from the gun."

Ben gaped at me. "You think she fired the Colt into her swimming pool. Collected the spent bullet and hand-built a cartridge with it. And used that in her zip gun!"

"I do not think that," I told him. "I damn well know it."

"But there'd be marks from the *second* gun!"

"There were—on the cartridge case. Different firing pin, like they thought. But nothing on the bullet. You don't get rifling marks from a zip. It's got a smooth barrel, like a shotgun."

"Right!" Ben was sitting on the swivel chair. He leaned back and gazed into the air as though admiring the idea's beauty. Then some lines drew themselves down his face and he sighed heavily.

"Okay," I said. "What's your problem?"

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"Well," he leaned forward and opened his hands, "it's a beautiful theory . . ."

"Yes, it is."

". . . but we're a bit short on evidence."

"Yes," I said, sighing myself. "We are."

I walked over to our display of handyman artifacts, laid out along the railroad track between the switchyards and the little town. We had about half a dozen triggers, maybe two dozen firing pins, two or three springs . . . What we didn't have was a gun barrel. It need only be an inch or two long, but it had to be some kind of cylinder, even if it had been squashed flat afterward. She couldn't have destroyed it, or even mutilated it so badly that a team of professionals wouldn't know exactly what it was. She just hadn't had time.

So where was it?

It had been almost midnight when we got the call from ballistics. By now we were completely bagged.

"Look, I think we'd all better get some sleep," I announced. "Tomorrow, eight o'clock sharp, we'll meet back at Division and take a fresh crack at it, okay? Come on, everybody, out! Out!" They dragged their feet, but we got them moving toward the door. It brought back memories of my first job—bouncer at the St. Regis Hotel in London, Ontario—right around closing time.

Ben and I looked at each other.

"How're *you* doing?" I asked him.

"Pretty keyed up, really. You in a rush?"

"No, I can hang in for another fifteen or twenty."

"Good. I just want to poke around a little, you know, look over the artifacts."

"Go ahead. I can amuse myself. Something I've been wanting to do since I got here."

I went around the circuit, lowering the hinged passageways. I came back to the swivel chair, sat down, and looked over the controls. "All," I said, one hand on the power dial, "aboard!"

A low hum rose swiftly in frequency and merged with a *tickety-tick* sound as the train started up. It was just entering the tunnel by the mining operation. The sound was muffled for a few seconds, then the engine popped out the other side with a triumphant rattle, sailed around the long curve, and swooped down on the town, where the poor folks on the platform watched it pass them by again. It rushed out of town and across the trestle, over a riverbed strewn with little boulders, like the one in every cowboy movie you've ever seen. Then it was off through the countryside, on a scenic ride through artificial nature, until it entered the scarified industrial wasteland surrounding the mine. The train itself seemed shocked—it took a little hop just before the mine, at a

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point where a couple of sidings veered off from the main line. After the mine came the tunnel, where the sight of all that vulgar moiling for gold or coal or whatever it was could be blotted out. Then it was out of the tunnel and roaring into town again. It was a short trip, but satisfying to watch.

Except for that little hop between the forest and the mine. That was irritating. It happened at a point where the tabletop was at its widest and the line ran along the outside edge of it. Even when standing at the point closest to the trouble, I had to lean way over the platform to get a look at it. Turned out to be something wrong with the switch for one of the spur lines. It wasn't fitting right. I didn't want to mess it up, and I couldn't get at it properly from where I was anyway, so with a twinge of annoyance I straightened up again and scowled down at it sleepily. My hand bumped something on the table. I looked down and realized I was standing over the little dry-fuel steam locomotive. It was cold now, luckily, or the smoke would have been pouring out of the smokestack right in my face.

I admired it for a moment. An impressive piece of miniature machinery. There was something familiar about it, something that reminded me of something else, but my weary mind couldn't quite make the connection. The train passed by again, and I leaned forward to watch more closely as it hopped over the bad switch. That's when I noticed that the steam engine was positioned in a direct line between the broken switch I was reaching for and where my feet pretty much had to be in order for me to reach it. It was also right under my chin.

That's what was familiar about the steam engine. It was the bore of the smokestack. It looked exactly like the muzzle of a Colt .45.

A wave of cool pleasure rolled through me, like your first beer on a hot and humid summer afternoon.

"Ben," I said quietly.

He looked up and stared at me. Probably my hair was floating. He said, "You got it!"

Together we figured out that the front of the engine opens up when you unscrew the handle in the center of it. Inside is the smokebox, I've since learned, which is a mostly empty area where smoke from the firebox collects, until it's blasted out the smokestack by steam exhausted from the cylinders beneath.

In this one there was a small hole beneath the cylinders, in the bottom of the smokebox. From there we could follow an unobstructed path, with plenty of plastic bushes and green felt undergrowth for camouflage, directly to the switch lever.

The first thing a person would do when confronted with a gummed-up switch would be to fiddle with that lever. A concealed

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wire attached to it, and connected at its other end to a spring, a hammer, and a firing pin in the smokebox, would fire a .45-caliber cartridge straight up into the head of the person leaning over to do the fiddling. Automatically.

Then all the killer had to do was make sure she was the first person into the room. In that brief moment, while her witness was frozen with shock, she could open the door of the smokebox, pull out the tripwire and the parts of her zip gun, and lose them amidst the hundreds of similar bits and pieces Jim Lake had lying all over the room. Except the cartridge case—that she had to crush and kick under one of the little chests of drawers. Even so, the whole cover-up would take seconds.

But Stephanie had not been the first person into the room. And Danny Sobelman had been so attentive. So she'd had to distract him by "discovering" the Colt, and buy herself enough time to dismantle the real murder weapon. And that "discovery," I was sure—so sure—was going to put her away.

I remembered how sure I'd been that night when, a few weeks later, Ben and I were at the airport. We had no good reason for being there—airports are federal jurisdiction—but neither could we stay away. We just stood there, gazing across the busy stream of travelers towards the Alitalia desk.

And I remembered how the next day we had hung around the lunchroom at 53 Division, where our uniforms worked, shooting the shit, waiting for the lab report that would nail the case. I was drinking coffee. Janine Chen was straddling a chair backwards in that butch pose typical of young policewomen. They grow out of it. Old Brant leaned against the wall sipping something with a tea bag in it. Ben lay sloppily across the table with his head perched on one arm and his eyes half-closed.

"Late night, Ben?"

"The wife," he yawned. "Make me do yard work all night."

"*Yard* work?"

"Yes, man. Can't stop till me plant the seed!"

Everyone broke up, except Janine, who picked up her cap and smacked him with it.

"Do we have a motive, Bruno?" Brant asked me.

"I think so," I said.

"Money?"

I thought about that.

"Life, is more like it," I said at last. "She wanted one. She wanted to travel, see the world—live. He just wanted to go round and round the basement. She was young, beautiful, sophisticated, and married to an ageing twelve-year-old. So since *she* wasn't getting any younger—" I shrugged, "—*he* couldn't get any older!"

Ben and Brant laughed, but Janine looked disgusted.

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"I can't believe you guys!" she said. "Bruno, you sound like you wish she'd got away with it."

Before I could deny that, the door opened and a fresh-faced young rookie stuck his head in.

"Fax here for Manx, Bruno, Detective Sergeant." I snatched it from him and began to speed-read.

My face must have fallen to about my waist.

"Bruno!" somebody cried.

"What is it?"

"Did they find any residues?"

I couldn't answer them. I couldn't speak. I let the flimsy fax paper drift out of my hand.

Oh, they found residues, all right. You name it, they found it—carbons and nitrates, trace metals, sulfides. It was a smokestack, wasn't it? And she'd been burning things in the firebox—with my help—paper, wood, fire-starter, little bits of goddamn coal, and the smoke from all of it had gone up the stack and coated it with a million different chemical deposits. It wasn't like trying to find a needle in a haystack—it was much worse. It was like trying to find a particular piece of hay!

The evidence was tainted, in the words of my official report. Thoroughly tainted. Totally and irretrievably tainted. It couldn't have been more tainted if we'd sent it out to a professional evidence-tainting service, at great expense. We had no evidence. We had no case.

So a few weeks later we had to be at the airport, on the Departures level, across from the Alitalia desk, watching as three skycaps moved Stephanie Lake's luggage through check-in. She wore a short, simple vanilla-colored dress which showed off her shapely and well-toned legs.

"Off on the Grand Tour," I said. "And well equipped for it."

"I know one part of the tour she won't be taking," Ben said.

"What's that?"

"The scenic railway journey!"

I laughed. But I kept my eye on Mrs. Lake. Sure enough, just before she disappeared through the doors of the First Class Lounge, she tossed a glance over her shoulder. From fifty feet away she caught my eye, and smiled a friendly, beautiful, brief little smile. And she was gone.

A very thorough, very capable woman. ●

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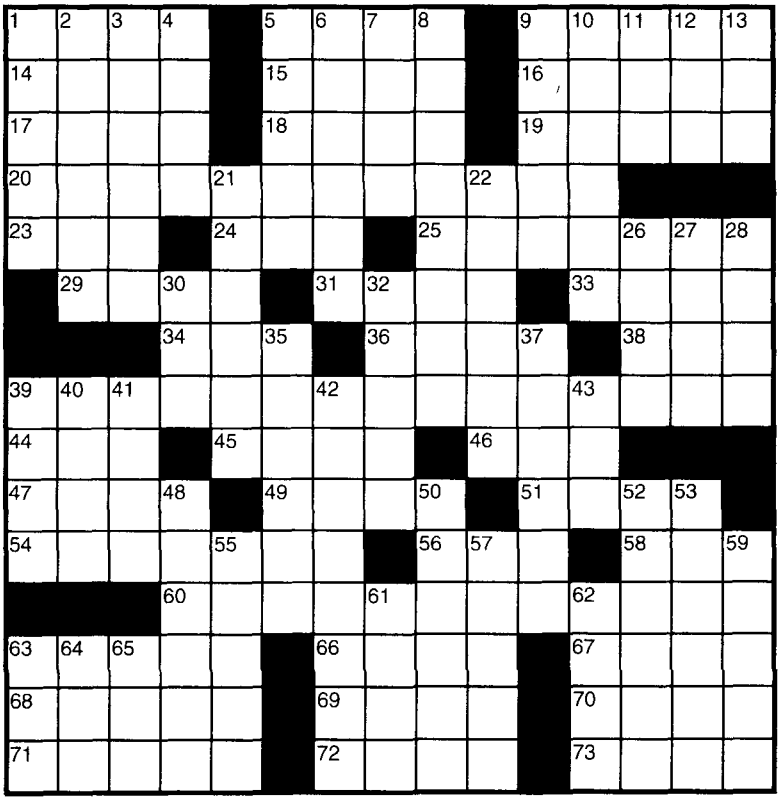
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

It's the Pitts

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 120

ACROSS

1. Old Testament prophet
5. Competent
9. Constituent
14. Ngaio Marsh, e.g.
15. Essential
16. Hippodrome
17. Indigo
18. Gifts
19. Lucy to Kay Scarpetta
20. This and 39 and 60 Across, crime settings for Anne Perry
23. Krazy _____
24. "No," to John Rebus
25. Lists
29. Localities
31. Carry on

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33. Record
34. Soul in St. Lô
36. Garlands
38. Three, pref.
39. See 20 across
44. Dr. Sam Hawthorne's org.
45. West German river
46. Mouse in 47 across
47. Home to Falco
49 "I can't believe —— the whole thing."
51. Wife killer
54. *Death,* _____ *Apple Pies,* Valerie S. Malmont
56. Sounds like the creator of Dr. Gideon Fell
58. Hill dweller
60. See 20 across
63. Homer's works
66. Lawman Wyatt
67. Rare thing
68. Aggregate
69. Tall, Sp.
70. Dr. "Didi" Nightingale and colleagues, familiarly
71. Compensate
72. Antelopes' playmates
73. Being

DOWN

1. "It was _____ and stormy . . . "
2. Handbook
3. _____ mention, leave out
4. Hawk
5. G.E. rival?
6. Lost some hair
7. Slack
8. One who takes another's freedom
9. Van Dine's Philo
10. Christie's "Express"
11. Kind of shirt
12. Abbr. on a letter
13. Actress, Mrs. Pitt's namesake?
21. Ghosts, to Gordianus
22. Underlies one kind of discrimination
26. Information
27. Mimic
28. Arid
30. Ripken, Jr., "Rookie of the Year" in 1982
32. Sharp
35. Death
37. Landowner
39. _____ Hiaasen, *Lucky You*
40. Maigret's "mine"
41. Like some excuses
42. Reginald Hill used the plural as a title
43. "Born in the _____"
48. _____ School of Art, a.k.a. "The Eight"
50. Card game for two
52. Texas county
53. Starts
55. Found in church or theater
57. Very good finish for most golfers
59. Concise
61. Tempest
62. Wander
63. Follows zeta
64. Illegal substance
65. California judge

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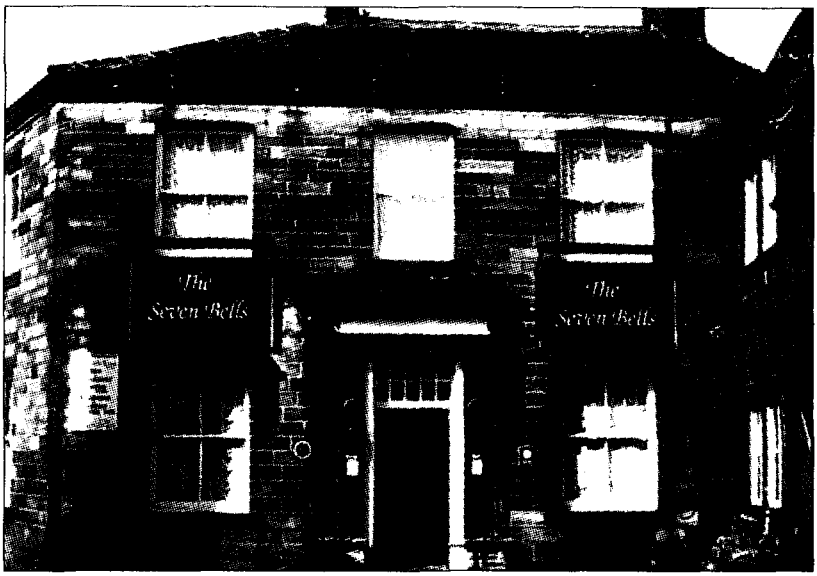

Photo by John Hutchings

The Copper Threw a Rock

by Jeffry Scott

Mercer ducked into the Seven Bells and something happened to the landlord's face without altering the man's expression. Used to that, Mercer said, "Try relaxing, all I want is a drink." The Seven Bells was high on his list of pubs to avoid except when on business, but rain riding a winter gale across Market Plain stung like grapeshot even as it threatened to soak him.

Any port in a storm, and failing port, whisky will do. Old joke.

"Scotch and threat," he ordered. The landlord jabbed a tumbler at the inverted bottle in the rack, making the optic measure's bull's-eye wink once, poised the water jug without releasing its contents—that was the threat part of the traditional order—and pushed the drink towards Mercer with the backs of his fingers, as if fearing contamination.

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"You're all I need," he muttered. Likewise, Mercer nearly answered. He tried to recall the publican's name. Turning a shoulder to surly host and other patrons alike, he stared at a vacant corner and sipped whisky.

"Something stinks in here," came a mocking chant. "Smell of pigs, now what can *that* be?"

Clever, Mercer thought, pretending not to hear. His swift, overtly uninterested survey just now had missed Johnno Colrane. Trust Colrane to wave a flag. His stupidity would land him in prison if his bullying didn't do the trick first. Now Colrane was doing pig impressions, grunting and squealing to general merriment. Mercer smiled with one side of his mouth, all of a quarter-inch. Once he'd have agonised over walking out as soon as his glass was empty, letting Johnno Colrane brag over making him retreat.

Jeffry Scott once told *EQMM* that he was "fated to write mystery stories, having grown up very near Kenn, Somerset, which in 1830 saw England's last public execution, held at the scene of the crime. An innkeeper and two farmhands were hanged for arson, having burnt one hundred dollars' worth of corn in an enemy's field. The memorable last words from the scaffold were: 'Cider has been my ruin, and the ruin of us all,' which was still a half-serious local saying a century later." †

These days he wasn't quite as stupid as Johnno. Or just older and less intent on proving himself. Unless it was older and less confident of winning a brawl. Could be, Mercer conceded, refusing to let ego taunt him into taking a dare.

"This used to be a decent pub," Colrane needled, unseen yet evident.

Now there you are wrong, Mercer commented in his head. The Bells has always been iffy and no one knew why, maybe a curse laid on it at birth. Lately the place was a real thieves' kitchen. Terson, that was the new landlord's name. A weakling, eager to be liked: character traits ruining him in the long run. Terson had let the likes of Johnno Colrane take liberties, driving respectable custom away. Then the hounds, tearaways, and robbers had to be allowed greater liberties because they were his only source of income.

The clown's annual trip to court, seeking renewal of his licence, was due soon. The police would oppose it and the magistrates would reject the application. Exit Terson—blaming the bloody coppers, not Johnno Colrane and his crew—and the Seven Bells might be more orderly under a new master.

Mercer's back was affected by a shiver under the skin. He sensed that Johnno Colrane was about to come over. He wondered, without much anxiety, whether Colrane would reach him before the

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drink was finished. Shame to hurry liquor, greater shame to let it spill. If Colrane was deeply stupid and as drunk as he sounded, he'd believe that Mercer was rooted in place by fear, and be encouraged to try a punch.

Reasonable force, Mercer reminded himself, else you'll be in trouble. The hand hidden in his pocket had begun fumbling coins into place between the fingers, as soon as Colrane announced his presence. Mercer sighed and let the metal slide free again, melting the improvised knuckleduster.

The meaty, sickening noise of a blow and a cry of pain took him unawares. Wheeling, he caught a photo-flash image of a plump, middle-aged man, spectacles ludicrously askew, collapsing off a stool. Then the lights went out.

Market Plain was well lit, but the street windows of the Seven Bells had grimy net curtains. For a long moment it was hard to see anything beyond dim shapes. Mercer mule-kicked sharply, just in case, fetching an anguished cry from whoever had hoped to pounce on him. Planting both hands on the bar, he vaulted it gracelessly and scraped a shin on the edge. Fumbling for the panel on the wall, he switched the lights back on.

Terson glowered at him, half scared and half smug. "Smart," Mercer commented flatly.

"I never touched them lights."

"No, and I'm not going to put you out of business before the month is over. Stay away from those switches." Now that he could see where it was, Mercer raised the bar's flap and returned to the public side. The plump man writhed on the floor, a landed fish. Mercer dropped to one knee and gripped the victim's wrists. "Lie still, chum, or you'll make it worse."

The spectacles were still askew, fixed in place by fangs of broken lens and metal frame driven in at the eye socket. "Everything's fine," Mercer lied, "you'll be right as rain, help's on the way." No more heckling now, just the sounds of hurried departures.

By the time the policeman tugged the cell phone out of his pocket and made the call, one-handed, he, landlord Terson, and the wounded man were alone in the Seven Bells.

Depressed rather than angry, though anger was there, Mercer heard an army drill instructor suffered under in his youth. *"Something always goes wrong when you screw around."*

Amen to that. Terson had been screwing around for a year. Same went for Johnno Colrane and cronies tonight. "It hurts," whimpered the man on the floor. Saying that much hurt him, too; a bright, unbroken bubble of blood grew between pulpy lips.

"Soon have you right," Mercer soothed. A vehicle roared up and stopped in a hurry, delivering a couple of uniforms in an area car. The ambulance took a lot longer.

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"They might save the sight in that eye but it's not certain." Tulliver, Assistant Chief Constable, shook his head. "Bad business all round. Unprovoked assault on a harmless citizen. Press will make a meal of it."

"Clouds and silver linings," Sid Bishop put in. Sardonic and knowing, whatever he said had the flavor of a blue gag's punch line. "Knocks our Johnno C. off the board for, oh, three years minimum. Longer, if so be the judge's haemorrhoids are playing up."

Bishop was the city's Mr. CID—senior men above him and in nominal charge but he ran things. Noting Tulliver's blank look, Bishop turned plaintive. "John Colrane: Earlier this year you characterised him as a thorn in our side, remember? He's been lucky for too long—it is luck, he's a dim bulb—but now he has served himself up on a silver platter."

Mercer, who hadn't been invited to sit down, studied the floor and waited. He'd been through this with Bishop, who seemed to hope that being in front of Andrew Tulliver would alter a troublesome minion's answer.

"Before we go any further, I didn't see Colrane anywhere near Mr. Stebbins last night." Norman Stebbins, the man deserved a name, surely. "Strictly speaking, I never saw Colrane, full stop. Recognised his voice, that's all. By the time I got the lights back on, he'd had it away. Like the rest of the company—there they were, gone."

Tulliver frowned at Mercer, unwittingly stressing some obese, bald men's strong resemblance to babies with indigestion. "You let them leave the scene?"

"Attending to Mr. Stebbins was first priority." There might not have been an eye to save if he hadn't moved fast, Mercer nearly argued. Waste of breath with these two, so he discarded the notion. "Doubt if I could have stopped many in the dark. Three exits from the Bells, and that's just official ones. Daresay some climbed out the window in the toilets. That's partly why Colrane's sort use The Bells, it's good for bailing out of on the hurry-up."

"What were you doing there?" Tulliver was vaguely suspicious.

Tone colorless, Mercer replied, "Having a quiet drink after work."

Bishop murmured, "Sergeant Mercer is still getting his thoughts together, sir. When he comes to piece it all together, I'm sure he will recall—"

"With respect, boss, I can't remember what I did not see. Maybe Colrane clobbered the guy, it'd be par for his course. I did see two or three faces I can put names to, they may be better witnesses."

Tulliver cheered up at that; Bishop wasn't buying. "Witnesses in the Bells? Never happen." Bouncing to his feet, he took Mercer's

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arm and led him out. "I'll talk things over with our friend, sir. We'll nail Colrane for this."

"Not the way you want to," Mercer stated as soon as the door shut behind them. Pressing on before Bishop could counter, "It might not work, and if a wheel did come off, you'd be in the deep and sticky right beside me. I might even be standing on your shoulders to get a breath of air.

"Think it through—Stebbins gets out of surgery, starts thinking back while recovering, has a vivid recollection of whoever did him. Exact description, ruling out Johnno Colrane. Meanwhile, I have told a pack of lies which you swallowed and acted on. Wrongful arrest and conspiracy spring to mind. We're both too near our pensions to go looking for that."

"I'd take the risk." All the same, Bishop's pace had slowed. "Come on, Ted, golden opportunity. Are you abso-posilutely sure it *wasn't* Johnno?"

"Can't say either way. Be reasonable, I'd been in there five minutes, tops." Mercer examined the statement. "Nearer three minutes, long enough to order a tincture and drink half of it. Keeping my head down, trying not to get involved. You're the one who has been riding me about my temper. . . .

"I went to a great deal of trouble not to look Colrane's way. He was trying to wind me up. I blanked him, was ready to walk out—too many cronies ready to wade in and help him."

"Not like you to be timid," Bishop taunted.

Mercer halted, giving him a steady look. "Fair comment," Bishop said defensively, breaking eye contact.

"With a mob coming at me I'd have had to put at least two in hospital for the rest to get the message," Mercer stated, coldly patient. "Wouldn't have looked good. Nor would they have afterwards, and you know how Mr. Tulliver is about that."

The ACC deprecated assaults on police officers but his most potent rages erupted when they resented assault to the point of retaliating first.

"Shame Johnno C. didn't get you going—you'd have given him a bloody good hiding and that civilian wouldn't be in hospital."

Mercer laughed briefly. "Boozer packed with folk ready to swear *I* attacked *them,* unprovoked? It was what they were playing for. I'd be slung off the Force, probably a year or so inside for teaching a toerag to mind his manners. Break your heart, would that, last thing you'd wish on me."

"Paranoia," Bishop asserted jovially. "I treasure you, Ted." Sure he did; the sour wisecrack around HQ was that Bishop smiled people in the back.

Losing patience with the game, Mercer waited for the lift doors to close, yet even in the sealed cube he lowered his voice. "You

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want the truth, here it is again: I'm pretty certain Colrane had nothing to do with it. He was heckling from over by the fruit machines, Stebbins was the width of the bar away. If you want Johnno C. fitted up, you are on your own, boss."

Mercer was sick of them all—the crims, Bishop and Tulliver and the rest of the governors, plus the task they all attempted. Empty the ocean with a broken cup, try sweeping it back with a scantily bristled broom. Not a fresh insight, and he was irritated at encountering it yet again, even for a split second. "If you can't take a joke then you shouldn't have joined," was the police proverb.

Words to live by, Mercer reminded himself. "I'll get Johnno C., never fear. There's more than one way of skinning a cat."

"That's my boy." Mercer could tell that Bishop had decided against delivering his standard arm-round-the-shoulders hug of commendation. The man had a lot of nerve; on the other hand, Mercer had a notorious load of general-purpose resentment and an aversion to being touched. The lift doors slid back. Mercer said, "I'm off to see a few people—don't ask."

"Take all the time you want." Bishop raised a warning finger. "Long as it ends up right. Bring me the head of Johnno Colrane!"

Mercer started skinning the cat at Cowslip Hill. No wildflowers among row upon row of once-neat little houses built at public expense after World War II as affordable housing for returning heroes. Everything was going to be better; and what could be better than a fresh start in homes of their own. Slum territory these days.

Outside a house fitted with a steel-sheathed front door and windows gridded against flying bricks waited a this-year's Porsche, significantly unharmed. Mercer set a sole against its sleek side and shoved hard. Rocked, the car whooped and trilled, the alarm chasing its own echoes around the brick warren.

Bare-chested and shoeless, a man erupted from the house, baseball bat cocked, sleep-sodden face contorted. Recognising Mercer, he skidded to a halt. Flinging the bat aside, he unlocked the car and stilled the alarm. "Ha bloody ha. I find a scratch on the motor, you die." But there was a whine within the bluster. Mercer had hurt him badly when they were younger, or rather Steve Petty had been, and the copper was in his prime.

"And here I am with good news," Mercer reproached. "You and Johnno still on the outs? Cheer up, your time has come. Johnno was a naughty boy last night, right under my nose. He's going away, Steve—you heard it here first. That's worth a great big drink and I shall be round to collect, soon as the dust settles. Get busy and what was his can be yours."

He was turning away when Steven James Petty yelped, "Hang

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on, what the hell are you on about?"

"Sorry, thought you understood English. John Colrane, bachelor of this parish, ring a bell? Inflicted grievous bodily harm at the Seven Bells last night, put a punter in hospital. With me ringside. If you wondered how stupid Johnno C. can get, now you know. We've wanted him off the streets long enough, now he is on his way. See ya . . ."

And Mercer trudged off to slurp stewed tea in a deplorable cafe used by Sniffer, a taxi driver among other trades. Well informed but not the best of informers, too cowardly. Mercer talked football and women until Sniffer relaxed. Then: "Hear about the barney at the Bells?"

Sniffer giggled helplessly. "Reminds me of school . . . a song the girls had, for skipping-rope games. 'Where was Moses when the lights went out?' " He blinked anxiously. "No offense, Sarge, but it does have a comical side. Police left in the dark, for real. Somebody thought quick, eh?"

"Win a few, lose a few. Johnno Colrane's the dot on the card for that one, he was within touching distance of the feller who got put down, saw him myself."

"T'weren't Colrane." Sniffer set his mug down, paling. "Not that I know nothing, it's just what they're saying . . ."

"Who's saying?"

"This one 'n that one, nobody to put a name to. Just what's going round. I'd help if I could, Mr. Mercer. I just hear stuff in the cab. Passengers, hundreds a year, how can I remember who said what?"

"Fair enough, miracles take longer." Mercer indulged in his grudging, partial smile and mused aloud, "Steve Petty will be disappointed, then. He must go down on his knees every night praying for Johnno to come unstuck."

Sniffer, believing himself on safer ground and proud of his expertise, smirked patronisingly. "Don't you believe it, that's history. They made it up months back, thick as thieves now—" He broke off, tittering. "Thick as thieves! I made a funny."

"Hilarious. Don't kid a kidder, those two hate each other. Two big frogs, as if, and one little pond to fight over."

"I wouldn't steer you wrong. Common knowledge, Sarge. They been together since the Birmingham crew tried getting in here, the clubs and that. Steve and Johnno wasn't having outsiders on the patch. Called a truce while they saw the Brum lot off, and they've worked together ever since."

"Live and learn," Mercer muttered sheepishly. He saw an edge of contempt in Sniffer's glance. Good. Sniffer was a better talker than a snout. Let the word go forth . . . Mercer the duffer, well behind the times, navigating by the wrong maps. Steve Petty, once

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he woke up, was likely to reach the same conclusion, so everything was coming along nicely.

Somebody had advised Johnno Colrane that a steady job, or better yet, your own legit business, went down well in court. So Johnno had a stall on Market Plain where—when he bothered to show up—he sold very little crockery, very slowly.

He was behind the stall, eating a burger, when Mercer ghosted up to him. Colrane straightened in a hurry, the burger exploding at his feet. "Get out of my—" dithering between face and space, he managed "flace," and was furious at the chuckle that raised.

"You were having a dig at me in the Bells last night. I got distracted, well, you were there, you know what happened, but here I am. Try it now, I fancy a light workout."

"Lay a finger on me and I'll get you fired." Johnno C.'s style altered radically when on his own. He never fought solo.

"Come on, I'll stick my hands in my pockets, shut my eyes . . ."

"Leave me alone. I'm on to you, Mercer. You won't fit me up for that bloke at the Bells, I was only passing through, never set eyes on him till—" Mouth closing with a wet smack, Colrane changed mental course before finishing "—till he got a whack and some joker put the lights out. I never touched the fella and you can't prove I did."

Interesting: Evidently Johnno Colrane knew the attacker's identity and had nearly let a name slip. Mercer would have been amazed had he not known; Colrane had a natural interest in learning details of the fracas. "What's to stop me fitting you up for it? A police officer with an unblemished record, sort of, versus a loser with previous convictions. I stand up, hand on the Book, and swear I saw you do him . . . who will be believed?"

Outwardly impassive, Mercer relished his target's fear and growing panic. "I done nothing," Colrane yelped, "you're a bloody liar."

"They all say that. Face it, you are going away." Mercer's tone was maddeningly consoling. "Fortunes of war, kid. Think of all the strokes you got away with and haven't done time for—it evens out in the end, same as bad calls in tennis. Say it quick and three years is nothing. Deduct time spent on remand—we'll oppose bail, naturally—then earn remission and you'll be out before you know it.

"Still long enough for Steve Petty to take over, there is that. Not to worry, he'll find something tasty for you when you get out. Parking cars, cleaning toilets, maybe; Steve's not one to hold a grudge."

"You know nothing! Me and him are partners, it's all changed now."

"Now is the word. Soon as you go inside, the picture changes."

Mercer sensed Colrane's dread, palpable as his coppery reek of sweat. The policeman stepped back a pace; the man was thinking too hard now to launch a punch or use his knee. Come on, Mercer pleaded inwardly, join the dots . . .

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As though responding to a cue, Colrane pulled himself together. "You're just winding me up. You can't make it stick. Charge me, then."

"All in good time. It's fun making somebody sweat, you ought to know that. We want to know how badly your victim is hurt before we decide on the charges, plural. Meaning more than one, dumbo. Two-three days and you'll be arrested, count on it.

"One door closes and another opens, as the saying goes. Nothing personal, Johnno, but I am on a nice earner here. Steve Petty won't be sorry to see you gone, and he's not the sort to forget his friends." Mercer grinned, rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

"Bull," Johnno Colrane spat. "Bluff and bull." Behind the flickering gaze, Mercer gathered, calculations were being made. "Charge me right now or leave me alone, I got a living to earn."

"Very well, sir," Mercer conceded, insultingly suave. He wandered away through the maze of stalls and booths, guardedly satisfied by the confrontation. Colrane was innocent—this time. And he knew who was guilty. The likes of Johnno Colrane could not denounce the attacker to the police; honor among thieves, a decidedly dubious concept, was irrelevant, but turn informer, however pressing the motivation, and he was finished.

Therefore Johnno must find another way of clearing himself. Obviously Steve Petty had told him of Mercer's apparent mistake, warning his ally that the police were preparing a frame-up for the man with a record.

That was the beauty of it: Thanks to Mercer's hint that Petty was encouraging the police to arrest his associate, Petty would have to show all the more solidarity . . . Yes, he and Colrane would put their heads together and Mercer was reasonably sure what they would do next.

Bishop woodpeckered a thumb against his chest, declaring, "Unhappy camper, me. When you promised to get Colrane, I never twigged it meant getting him off the hook."

Mercer tried to look concerned. He was back in the CID office after a rest day passed without bothering his head about Johnno Colrane. Dispiriting enough to deal with such dross when he was on duty.

Bishop's eyes—borrowed from a goat, amber and wicked, Mercer always thought—glittered. "A certain Edgar Isley rolled up yesterday. Six-two, shoulders out to here, make two of you or me." Bishop stopped pecking his chest to indicate a small gap. "Brow lower than that. Mindless thug, not even the sense to brutalise for money, strictly a hobby with him.

"Eddie was in the Bells with his girlfriend and got the idea a stranger at the next table was showing too much interest in her.

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He 'had a word with him' about that, but the stranger—Stebbins, who else—took no notice."

Bishop pulled a face. "Turns out Stebbins is hearing-impaired, a.k.a. deaf as a post, if you're not PC. In a noisy pub he had no chance of hearing what Isley was on about. So he was assumed to be dissing Eddie *and* ogling Eddie's woman. She goes off to powder her nose, Stebbins smiles at her. Chivalrous Eddie doesn't think twice, or at all, for my money, picks up a china ashtray weighing a couple of pounds and smashes it into Stebbins's face.

"When that bloody landlord switched the lights off, Isley was just sufficiently smart to run like hell."

Bishop sighed irritably. "The man's an animal—and that slanders animals. When I explained Stebbins was deaf, not defiant, Eddie got het-up." Pushing his nose awry with one finger, Bishop used another to fold his ear into a cauliflower, and assumed a lumpen voice. " 'How was I s'posed to know that?' Tell Edward that he's looking at years in prison, not a few hundred hours' community service, and you could see the thought-balloon over his pointy head: *'What sort of world is this where I go inside over a mere matter of maiming a handicapped man for no reason?'* If I was the despairing type, I'd despair."

In fact, Bishop sounded frenetically cheerful. "First thing I did when Isley showed his ugly face was get him examined by a doctor. He was fresh from a beating-up, the three-rounds-with-a-cement-mixer look, and a snide defense brief would make hay with that at the trial. Horror photos passed to the jury, did they believe his client sustained these injuries *before* the police interview? Well, I shot that fox before it could run."

His face darkened. "Somebody got hold of Eddie Isley and made him put his hands up to assault. You arranged that, it reeks of your sneaky style."

"I may have given a few people the wrong impression," Mercer conceded, bland as a politician. "Johnno C. got it into his head he was about to be fitted up for the Seven Bells business. I didn't tell him that, he heard it from an associate first. What's the problem, boss? You saying Eddie Isley didn't smash Mr. Stebbins's face?"

"Isley did it, no argument. That's not the point." Bishop adopted his more-sorrow-than-anger manner. "You fancy yourself a chess player, Ted, and you've hardly got the brain for checkers. What were you playing at, you and your disinformation?"

"Colrane in a panic was likely to do something stupid—more stupid than usual—and then we'd have him. He and Steve Petty run together, so with luck we'd get two for the price of one."

"Didn't work. What he did get was out from under, as you might have guessed he would. Obviously he went in mob-handed and gave Eddie Isley a spanking and said there was more to come if

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Isley didn't give himself up. Tulliver would spit on me from a great height if I tried proving that his confession was beaten out of the ape. Why look a gift horse in the mouth—bottom line, the guilty man's been found."

"Makes the clear-up stats look good, too. Serious assault dealt with in seventy-two hours."

"Don't push it, Ted. There's another bottom line: You have let me down and that *is* serious. Where's the severed head I ordered?" Bishop was half in earnest, hyperbole or no, and the goatish gaze was baleful.

"Hold your horses, boss. Let's see how things develop."

"Wait until Christmas and then we shall all have a slice of turkey?"

"It shouldn't take that long." *I hope,* Mercer qualified the assurance, silently. "Things have turned out well, considering."

Icily sceptical, Bishop looked a question.

"Considering Eddie Isley got gift-wrapped and left on our doorstep. They're a funny lot, that family."

"I'm not laughing." The Isleys, Bishop felt, were small fry and he knew that Edward of that ilk was nothing out of the ordinary: a garbage man for the borough council, some juvenile-court convictions for vandalism and petty theft, no criminal record as an adult. Just another blob of pond life, the brawn-without-brain genus.

Bishop's view would have been unaltered had he attended Magistrates' Court the following morning. Eddie Isley was "up and down in a flash," as the trade jargon has it: confirmed his name and address and entered a plea of guilty. Hapless, hearing-impaired Norman Stebbins, who'd dropped in for a drink in a strange city and finished the evening in Accident & Emergency, hadn't been blinded, but his wounds justified a Grievous Bodily Harm charge. The magistrates, amateur wrist-slappers, sent Edward Isley to be dealt with by a proper judge at the next Quarter Sessions in nine weeks' time. Bail was granted meanwhile.

Mercer hovered near the doorway throughout, sizing things up. Bishop's slur about Eddie's pointy-headedness had a basis of truth. Young Isley sloped abruptly from a bull neck to the apex of his Mohican haircut. The little courtroom was uncomfortably full of people sharing the general outline, regardless of gender.

Inbreeding, Mercer diagnosed. The Isleys originated from a remote, moorland hamlet beyond the city. In the old days, winter floods had turned the place into an island for several months a year. Lord knew what had gone on by way of boredom-relief, but mortals might speculate. . . .

He was rubbing his hands as he scooted away before the dynasty closed ranks around Eddie Isley and escorted him to the

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street. It was all turning out well—but not, Mercer suspected, for Johnno Colrane. Displeasing Eddie's kinsfolk was A Bad Thing.

An American state has "Don't tread on me" as its motto, and it applied to the Isleys, too. They "kept themselves to themselves" (and kept others' property if it wasn't nailed down, resentful neighbors whispered). The moorland side of the family had bought a perfectly good farm in the 1960s and turned it into a scrapyard doubling as venue for fights—dogs, bare-knuckle marathons, anything savage and illicit—never allowing themselves to be caught at it.

The city branch of the Isleys, to which Eddie belonged, colonised a council tower block, piling up record rent arrears on their flats, oppressing other tenants, and giving sundry social workers a yen for different careers. Persistent lawbreakers and rule-scorners, they weren't professional criminals as such, more a fitful pain in the body politic.

"Sit down, Ted, you make the place look untidy," Belle Buxton scolded fondly. "I can't abide being loomed over."

Serenely middle-aged, as she had been for decades to Mercer's knowledge, Belle was less fat than opulent—there was a lot of her, but all in proportion. Even wearing flannel pajamas, a utilitarian dressing gown, and bunny slippers, there was a faint aura of stocking-tops and ribboned corset about the lady.

She had shown no surprise at his past-midnight visit, announced by a discreet, coded knock at the back door of her bungalow. Officially they were acquaintances; neither was anxious to compromise that impression.

Mrs. Buxton owned a members-only club where one could drink the clock round. She ran an escort agency. She was trusted by a lot of people and a lot of them happened to be villains. There was little more to it than that. If Mrs. Buxton's club made a high profit on liquor bought cheap from suppliers who had stolen rather than paid for their stock, Mercer was uninterested.

Belle would have been furious to be termed an informer, a vulgar grass. Mercer had done her a favor, once upon a time, and she remembered it. He visited her furtively and regularly. Occasionally she thought aloud. If he chose to make use of what he overheard . . . well, it was a free country.

Sitting in her kitchen with the blind pulled down and the back door locked, Belle sipped jasmine tea and her guest worked on something amber and stronger, in a cut-glass tumbler like a dwarf bucket.

"I hear there's been wailing and gnashing of teeth because you let Johnno Colrane walk away from GBH," she teased. "That nice Mr. Bishop going round with a face on him like he dropped a

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guinea and picked up a penny. Blames you for going soft on Johnno, by all accounts."

"Soft be damned. Johnno didn't hammer that fellow, end of story. Funny the way things turn out; we got the right man because Colrane made the idiot turn himself in. Must have killed him to help us lot, even to keep himself out of court."

Belle smiled narrowly. "He wasn't worried about being done for assault—he had to get straight with Steve Petty. Steve went nuclear when it looked like Johnno would get locked up. Told him to sort it double quick, or else. Johnno C. plays the hard-man, Steve is the real thing. He was *very* unhappy about his partner getting into trouble."

"Strange. Steve Petty hates Johnno, wouldn't spit on him if he was on fire."

Mrs. Buxton clicked her tongue, censuring naivety. "Business, my dear. No room for emotion in business."

"Explain. I'm just an ignorant old copper."

"More than my life's worth," she said, shivering theatrically. "Shouldn't be giving a copper the time of day, old or otherwise. Though I will say an inquisitive person, which I'm not, might wonder why those two teamed up."

"Safety in numbers, 'my enemy's enemy is my friend,' and all that. They had to repel boarders, the Birmingham team wanted to take over."

"Colrane and Petty went partners ages before that. They were heads-together in my place last summer, it started that long ago. I expected trouble when Petty came in and went straight over to Johnno—but bless your heart, it was a meet, not Gunfight at the OK Corral."

"There's a thing." Abstractedly, Mercer tilted the bottle of scotch. "What in the world does a jerk like Johnno Colrane have that Steve wants a piece of? Johnno's a tosser, Petty doesn't need him."

"Expect me to do all your work for you?" Belle relented immediately, patting his hand. "I never ask questions but I can put two and two together. All the bouncers work for Steve Petty, he supplies door security to just about every disco and club worth mentioning."

"So?"

"Just mentioning a well-known fact. Now Johnno C., he never settles to anything. Keeps going to London. Can't be sightseeing, he is only there a few hours. Straight down the motorway, straight back. Never goes alone, must want somebody to chat to, it's a long drive. I can think of better travelling companions than Soldier Paul and his boy. Not much for conversation, those two. Wouldn't appeal to me, but Johnno C. won't stir without them. Or can't, maybe that is it. One of my girls has Soldier for a regular client, and he moans about being sick of the drive, motorway food, and

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Johnno smoking in the car and that. But the money's right. Steve Petty's a rough diamond but he pays up like a good 'un—which is more than you'd say about Colrane."

Paul Smith was a retired infantry veteran, wiry and formidably fit. He denied tales of serving with Special Forces, but the tales persisted. His son had also been in the army. The father's service pension apart, neither Smith had visible means of support, yet they lived modestly well. In truth, the duo were mercenaries who'd rather guard than enforce: highly respected and totally loyal for as long as they were paid.

"It would never do if I told tales on anyone," Belle giggled. "You mustn't ask me to! Change the subject, there's a dear—getting much lately, are you?"

Driving home, Mercer nodded to himself. Petty had a presence in night spots, Colrane made business trips or went on errands requiring the presence of bodyguards. They accompanied Johnno but were paid by Steve, suggesting that their employer's interests as well as his partner's person were being protected.

Bar spelling out the truth on a placard and waving it at him, Belle Buxton could hardly have been more lucid.

"How good is your source?" Bishop demanded next day.

"The best, leave it at that. Obvious, once you know—three of the biggest suppliers were nailed last year. Things went tight for a while, recreational coke users had to make do with grass, but lately it has been business as usual, plenty of Class A substances in circulation."

"Drugs Squad's worry."

Pretending not to hear that, Mercer persisted, "Steve Petty sells the stuff through his doormen; Johnno C. has a bulk supplier. Somebody he got next to when he came unstuck in the Smoke that time, I daresay. Did a stretch in a London prison, and London is where he goes with his minders. Colrane's a toerag with big ideas and no wedge. Petty has capital, still got the first quid he ever stole, plus an in to the clubs and discos.

"The drugs famine was a golden opportunity and they needed each other to take advantage of it. Makes sense of chalk and cheese getting together. Soldier Paul and that son of his don't come cheap. Petty doesn't hire them out of concern for Johnno's welfare. I mean, would *you* give Johnno C. a big bag of cash-money and let him out of your sight?"

Bishop grinned reluctantly. "Put that way . . . I suppose we ought to run this past Digger Curleigh, for what it's worth. Hearsay and hints, hardly like to worry his pretty little head with such trivia." Bishop and Inspector Curleigh of the Drugs Squad

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were on chilly terms. Not Curleigh's fault; Bishop disliked potential competition on principle.

"No," he contradicted himself, "it's too flimsy. Let's keep an eye on the pair of them, see if anything develops that is worthy of Digger's attention. Mustn't distract a high-flier without good reason." (Translation: Let Inspector Curleigh find out for himself, if he can. I'm not lifting a finger to help the upstart.)

Predictable reaction, but Mercer was satisfied. The idea was to bring Bishop up to speed. Like the reticent, hard-to-anger People of England in a poem by G.K. Chesterton, the Isley family had not spoken yet. When they did, an understanding of the Colrane-Petty alliance might be useful.

As days passed and he worked other cases, he became tetchy. Nothing was happening. Maybe leopards did change their spots. Or the Isleys had succumbed to religion and decided to turn the communal other cheek.

He could have read it wrong: How disappointing if their silence was accounted for by having nothing to say.

Emergency-vehicle sirens woke him. Not police cars, this bellowing was deeper, a gruffly macho order to get out of the way *now,* this was serious business. Two trucks raced past, then another, washing the bedroom ceiling in livid light.

"Who'd be a firefighter?" Mercer thought drowsily, and snuggled down again, heartlessly enjoying the reminder that he was warm and dry while others had it all to do. He was punished for this when the phone started ringing.

Sergeant Anderson was on night shift at Parsons Corner police station. "Better take your tin hat," he finished, " 'cause my chaps reckon it's like a war zone down there."

The fire was still raging when Mercer reached Nelson Street. Anderson's jest was justified: Mercer flinched at something between a cough and a thud from the furnace across the road. *Mortar,* he thought, observing a dark object arc out of the inferno to vanish with a crash of roof tiles in the next street.

"Put this on, if you must stick your nose in." The fire-brigade officer clapped a spare helmet on Mercer's head. He felt ridiculous.

"Paint," the fireman explained after the mortar went off again. "Shop-fitting firm stores drums of that and thinners and suchlike, on the ground floor—incendiary bomb waiting to ignite. They never learn."

"What about the flat above, did the guy get out?"

The officer turned abruptly, shouting, "Don't faff about over there, concentrate on the gable end for now." And to Mercer, "Nobody in when the place took light. Look, I'd love to stop and chat. . . ." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "One of your

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blokes is down the street, he'll fill you in. That thing like a big barbecue, out front? That was a lovely Series 3, showroom fresh. Somebody petrol-bombed it, molten debris went through a window into the building, and up she went. Ask your bloke. Oi! Keep it on till you get clear, but don't be keeping that headgear for a souvenir, they cost money."

A PC introduced Mercer to Mrs. Gee, an elderly cleaner turned girlish by excitement. "I'd just got off the night bus from work, put my key in the door, when Mr. Colrane pulled up outside his place. Another new motor, I thought, talk about flaunting it, and never done a day's work in his life. Then . . ."

Johnno Colrane was getting out of the car, said Mrs. Gee, when anything from three to seven men grabbed him. He'd been frog-marched across the road, and one of the group threw something at the lovely new motor, setting it alight. Johnno Colrane was cursing and struggling and then screaming as the men took turns to punch and kick him while the car went up in flames. Followed by "ever such a loud bang and the skin on my face went all taut, like opening a hot oven door."

The paint store's eruption startled the vigilantes. "They was struck to stone," Mrs. Gee asserted. "Not that Mr. Colrane, mark you. He was off like a whippet, you never seen anyone run so fast. The others piled into an old van and went after him and that's the last I saw of them. My Fred called the Brigade. Quite takes you back to ol' Hitler and his Blitz. . . ."

Surrendering the helmet to a firefighting team unrolling fresh hose, Mercer jogged around the corner and ducked into a dark doorway to use his cell phone. "I'm awake, you can join me," he mumbled, but that was before Bishop answered.

"Revenge of the Isleys," said Mercer. "Giving him a number—one kicking wasn't enough. They waited for him to take delivery of a brand-new BMW, just to rub his nose in it. Only things got out of hand." He had to pause as yet another fire truck roared past.

"Why tell me?" Bishop snarled. "And how come you are on the scene in the middle of the night, eh?"

"Left word at all the nicks, anything about Colrane or t'other fellow then give me a heads-up. *I* didn't torch his new Beamer, if that's what you are asking. But it's a grand excuse to give his partner a spin, legally. Check there's no dust under the beds, like. If we come across something Curleigh ought to have been on to long ago, so much the better."

"Ah . . . Shut up a minute, let me think. This lynch mob, anyone ID them at the scene?"

"No chance. There is a witness but she's ancient and it was dark, all she can say is they were male. And that's guesswork."

"Fool to myself, me—let's go for it. Get a squad together. Quietly,

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mind, need-to-know, pick the straight ones. Nothing worse than a surprise party that isn't, and I wouldn't bet my life against Petty having friends in CID.

"Wait at that filling station by the Southway underpass, it won't be open for another couple of hours, and I'll join you there ASAP. Everybody use their own cars, no blue-and-whites calling attention."

Mr. White the magistrate, woken early and acutely conscious of getting caught in a nightshirt emblazoned with Oscar Wilde's epigram about dull people being brilliant at breakfast time, snapped, "My granddaughter gave it to me and I promised to wear it." Tugging the garment down—it wasn't the Ebenezer Scrooge ankle-skimming variety but a skimpily extended T-shirt—he led Bishop into the living room. "This is a bit much, barging in before dawn."

"Sorry, but time's of the essence." Bishop delivered a disingenuous report on recent events, ending, "There's a history of conflict between Colrane and another professional criminal, Steven Petty. He's prime suspect . . . The longer Petty is given to destroy forensic evidence on himself and his clothing, arrange an alibi, and so forth, the less chance of bringing it home to him. This was reckless arson, classic gang-war tactics, a miracle no casualties resulted. As it is, damage will run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. I refuse to wait for the situation to get worse before it gets better."

Search warrant issued, Bishop sped on his way. *By gum,* he thought, *I said that well. Convinced myself for a second.*

An estate car and a battered Land Rover with the tailgate down awaited him half a mile from Cowslip Hill. "Jack Salmon's idea," Mercer said, patting the Land Rover. "Borrowed it off his brother-in-law. They've wedged a steel I-beam in the back, sticks out a foot or so. Jack got the idea from ram-raiders, he reckons Fort Petty will be a doddle, just reverse into it at forty per."

"Well done, Jack!" Bishop said heartily. And from the corner of his mouth, "Nothing like hulking thugs with single eyebrows to make a raid go well."

The steel-sheathed door was rammed open an instant after Bishop's token knock, and they swarmed in. "I want my lawyer, you can't get away with this," Steve Petty roared. In disgraceful Y-fronts and grubby string vest, he was no improvement on Mr. White. "You got no right, I'll sue you for the damage."

He was nonplussed when shown the search warrant. "What the hell is this about? I done nothing!"

"Somebody led a mob against your sworn enemy Johnno Colrane tonight. It's well known there is bad blood between you and—"

"Leave off, we're . . . " Petty decided against continuing, nearly swallowing his tongue in the process.

"Partners?" Bishop suggested helpfully. "In it up to your necks together? We'll see."

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But for the next two hours they failed to see anything in particular, apart from Steve Petty's interest in soft porn, steroids, and self-assembly models of Star Trek spaceships. Bishop insisted that Petty, and, within half an hour, his red-eyed and rumpled lawyer, be present at every stage of the search. There was an interlude while Petty was escorted to a squalid bedroom where he donned jeans and a thick sweater.

Avoiding Bishop's accusing gaze, Mercer thought, *We've got it wrong. He doesn't live here, not full-time. There's another crib and that's where he keeps the stuff. Double bluff, and I fell for it. Beefed-up security at this place, and all the while he has a second address.* "Anyone else notice a strong smell of petrol?" he asked, bolstering the overt purpose of the raid, but his heart wasn't in it.

Detective Constable Salmon, he of the single eyebrow, was Steve Petty's undoing. "Bit parky in here, I've been in warmer igloos," he complained. "What's the matter, Stevo, been cut off for nonpayment of bills?"

"Mr. Petty to you. Central heating's bust, plumber's due tomorrow," the homeowner retorted sulkily.

Bishop beamed on the company. "I went a bundle on war films when I was a kid. Not the bang-bang stuff, those prison-camp dramas. *Colditz Story, Stalag 17, The Great Escape,* all that lot. Trouble was, they all had the same gimmick. Our gallant lads dug a tunnel and hid the entrance under a stove."

There was no tunnel beneath Steve Petty's useless gas-boiler in a corner of the kitchen, but enthusiastic pulling, pushing, lifting, and levering disclosed a felt-lined vault the size of a steamer trunk. Mercer deduced that Johnno Colrane had made a recent business journey, for the cache held a number of heavy-duty plastic sacks, one-kilo bags by the look of them.

"For your personal use only, I presume," a poisonously playful Bishop murmured, wiggling his eyebrows. "In which case you must have nostrils the size of the Channel Tunnel."

"No comment," came in a chorus from Steve Petty and his lawyer.

"I was reasonably confident it wasn't kitchen salt or baking powder, but expert confirmation is always heartening," Bishop said later that week. "According to the lab report Inspector Curleigh's been kind enough to show me, Petty was sitting on a cartload of cocaine."

He tittered incredulously. "You'll never believe it, but Digger wanted to go whining to the chief constable over being kept out of the loop and me being an empire-builder and glory hound, out to undermine him. The very idea!"

"Ridiculous," Mercer agreed, deadpan.

"That's what I said. Not my fault that in the course of investigating a serious crime I nailed Petty for something else entirely.

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You'd think Curleigh would be grateful. Nasty, spiteful nature, and I told him so to his face."

"That's you, boss, straightforward, always blurting out the truth."

"Don't get cheeky. How many Isleys have you nicked for that fire?" A rhetorical question posed with malicious intent.

"I'm working on it. Very close-knit, that lot. These things—"

"Take time, I know. Somebody may get charged this century. Be still my heart."

"Go easy, boss. I did get Johnno C. for you." Steve Petty had decided that he was not going down alone. He insisted that he'd been a pawn of Johnno Colrane, the mastermind who blackmailed him into handling drugs. Told of his partner's version, Colrane had retaliated, talking his head off. Each expected a deal, neither would get it. Both were doomed.

"You've got the nerve of Old Nick to claim credit for that. All you did was sell Steve Petty a pack of lies, the rest just happened."

"My patented method," Mercer corrected him. "Sling a rock at a wasps' nest, run for your life, wait to see who gets stung. It generally works. Never a waste of time—even if crims don't come unstuck, you get a good laugh out of it."

Bishop, head on one side, studied him for a long moment. His expression, outsiders could have sworn, signalled moral outrage.

"I used to credit you with peasant cunning, but that hardly touches it. You're evil, Sergeant." Bishop nodded heavily, mouthing "evil" to himself, in confirmation. "That's what I like about you, when all's said and done." ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

A	M	O	S	■	A	B	L	E	■	V	O	T	E	R
D	A	M	E	■	M	A	I	N	■	A	R	E	N	A
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R	U	T	L	A	N	D	P	L	A	C	E	■	■	■
K	A	T	■	N	A	E	■	A	G	E	N	D	A	S
■	L	O	C	I	■	R	A	V	E	■	T	A	P	E
■	■	■	A	M	E	■	L	E	I	S	■	T	E	R
C	A	L	L	A	N	D	E	R	S	Q	U	A	R	E
A	M	A	■	E	D	E	R	■	M	U	S	■	■	■
R	O	M	A	■	I	A	T	E	■	I	A	G	O	■
L	I	E	S	A	N	D	■	C	A	R	■	A	N	T
■	■	■	H	I	G	H	G	A	T	E	R	I	S	E
E	P	I	C	S	■	E	A	R	P	■	O	N	E	R
T	O	T	A	L	■	A	L	T	A	■	V	E	T	S
A	T	O	N	E	■	D	E	E	R	■	E	S	S	E

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DRAW PLAY

by Hal Charles

Bennie Lee was a-laying on his back in the Wal-Mart parking lot trying to loosen the oil plug 'neath his Ford Ranger when he scared the living bejesus plumb outta me.

"Houston," my older brother announces, "I'm tired of living on the crazy check. It's time you and me became arch-criminals and started a crime wave like Clement County hasn't seen since the Great Depression."

Now I'm not the most reputable guy in town, but I certainly didn't want to be what our President calls one of them "evildoers." I admit it's hard to make a living on the measly $512 monthly disability check we each get, but we worked hard for that. I'm afraid that Bennie Lee's gonna rob some bank, and someone is gonna get hurt—like me.

"I'm not hearing no words coming from your pie-hole, Houston, so I'm assuming you like my idea."

"Truly, I just had my own brainstorm," I lie, trying to buy a little time.

"Like that time you wanted to start that pay lake and it didn't rain that whole summer and we lost everything but an acre of dried mud? Hah! If I hadn't dragged you over to Lawyer Sam and told you how to act like you got a bad case of SSI shivers, you'da never amounted to nothing."

He has me there. If Sam "The Man" Faro hadn't taught us the ropes of getting on the welfare draw, we'd still be looking for work. Which is kinda hard to get what with the Clement County unemployment rate being almost one outta every five. I look in my wal-

Hal Charles is a pseudonym for two professors at Eastern Kentucky University who are currently in their 31st and 33rd years there as teachers of creative writing. If their latest crop of students is anything to go by, they say, there's reason to believe that much of the best American writing these days is regional. Their latest offering for *EQMM* certainly has a regional flavor, and it deals with a major headache for the Commonwealth of Kentucky: benefits fraud.

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let. I only have thirty-one dollars, and the first of the month is nineteen days away. Suddenly my eyes catch the yellow flier taped to the light pole. "I got it."

"Me too," yells Bennie Lee, giving a heavy oomph. "Oh Lordy," he cries out and then he recites a string of real bad words I haven't heard since our high-school football coach caught us doing pot under the bleachers after the Model game. My brother slides out from under the car, his pants soaked right through in dirty crankcase oil. "This idea of yourn best be good 'cause I'm not in a really great mood." He spits a plug of Redman and Pennzoil on the hot August parking lot.

I point to the poster and start to read 'cause Bennie Lee's not very good at it. " 'Mountain Football League tryouts nine o'clock Saturday morning at Woodhole High Field. Every man over twenty-one who makes it through the day guaranteed fifty dollars.' Whatta ya think?"

"One, two, three, hike," he says.

The hot Saturday morning sun promises us a scorcher. I'm standing there in my cutoffs and Woodhole Wolverines (that's our high-school team) T-shirt sweating salt into my eyes, and we haven't even started practice yet. There must be a hundred and fifty of us there ranging from last fall's gridiron heroes to the over-the-hill crowd. Near the stands huddle all our women, looking like where they most want to be is back in their glory days, when they was cheering for us. 'Course most of them has put on a few pounds since pom-pom time. It's about five of nine, and everybody's milling around like cattle at the stockyard waiting for auction, and like them poor cows, nobody here seems to know what's going on.

Suddenly we hear a noise at the far end of the field, and the best-looking vehicle I ever seen up close comes wheeling in, a spanking new Ford F-150 King Ranch Super Cab with that custom cowhide look. Two people get out. One's a big guy with short hair, a coupla visible tatoos, and a clipboard. He's wearing a New York Giants sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off and gray coaching shorts. The other is a dude who's thin as a cornstalk, with sunglasses and a Reds baseball cap on backwards. New York hands us some paper and pencils, telling us to fill the forms out and get our picture taken by his assistant.

"When do we get the fifty dollars?" says Bennie Lee, licking the pencil point.

"Four o'clock this afternoon," says New York, "providing you can still walk up to me and take it."

"What's to stop us all from ganging up on you right here and taking all your money now?" says Bennie Lee half-seriously.

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New York reaches under his sweatshirt and pulls out one of them fancy Glocks. "Because I'll shoot you where it really hurts." He puts the gun away. "Besides, if you can make it in the MFL, there's big money out there."

"What's the MFL?" I say.

"The Mountain Football League. It's made up of semi-pro teams from Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia."

"I never hearda no MFL," drawls my brother.

"Well, I never heard of you, either, sport, but I'm Coach Mac and I'm willing to give you a chance at signing a big contract 'fore the day is over. You know, my daddy always taught me not to settle for a grape when there's a whole vineyard out there."

"How big's big?" says Bennie Lee.

"Depending on your position and your performance, sport, you might make five hundred dollars on a Saturday night."

At that, you could hear so much air being let out it sounded like a wind whipping down the Palisades.

"Derrick and I have spent the summer in all those other states signing up players. I'm surprised you boys haven't heard about us. The Kentucky Killers start play right after Labor Day, so we don't have much time to talk. You boys ready?"

"Yeah," echo a couple of guys.

"I can't hear you," New York says.

Pretty soon Coach Mac has us yelling louder than we ever did when we was just Wolverines. First, we get weighed and measured. Then we start running forty yards, and Coach Mac calls out our times. Then he gets out some weights from his truck and we see who can lift the most. Bobby Beasley, who blew out his knee up in Lexington, maxes out with 440 pounds. All the while the women start coming over toting large water bottles. And Derrick, he stands in the back of the truck with a videocam on a tripod recording it all.

By lunch break half the guys are gone. While we're eating free food he talked Hardees into giving us, Coach Mac explains that the MFL is being partially "underwritten," whatever that means, by the NFL. "So many kids are starting to skip college because they can't make it there or don't want to waste their time," he says. "And with players getting bigger, stronger, and faster, there's lotsa injuries. The pros need a taxi squad with players they can call up as replacements. Ergo, the MFL."

Then we're back under a sun that's sucking fluids outta me like those big leeches in Cap'n Bob's pond. We're running obstacle courses for times, and we're so tired that the last thing on Bennie Lee's mind is becoming an arch-criminal. Survival comes first.

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More guys leave. I'm so pooped I stop wondering what "ergo" means.

At 4:00, me and Bennie Lee and maybe thirty guys are survivors. Coach Mac hands each of us a spanking new fifty-dollar bill and tells us there'll be a live announcement about who makes the Killers Sunday night in the high-school gym. Me and my brother drive over to a local bootlegger's and pop for a case of cold ones. Clement County is dry and is gonna stay that way as long as the churchgoers and bootleggers keep their unholy alliance and vote together.

Sunday morning church attendance is way down. Half the male population is still hung over, and the other half is too sore and tired to move. A lot of us spend the afternoon sitting under the awning on Bennie Lee's double-wide dream sipping suds and talking about how much fun we had playing high-school ball together. It was a good time when most of us still believed we had potential to, as the Army says, be all we can be.

"I'da thought ole 'Rifle' Revel woulda been at tryouts," I say. "Best arm I ever saw in five years of high-school football."

"I hear he moved to Lexington," says Bobby Beasley. "Took a job as a security guard."

"Why'd he do that?" says Bennie Lee with a loud belch. He shakes his head. "Revel had the whole package—SSI card, Medicaid, and food stamps."

"Maybe he got 'fraid of those *Courier-Journal* reporters we run off last month." I laugh and everybody joins in. We've all been together since middle school when our parents had the far sight to sign us up for special-ed classes 'cause we was "learning disabled." I'm most happy to see Bennie Lee so content. He seems to have given up his big idea of us becoming arch-criminals.

The afternoon fades into evening, and we all dress up in our old high-school jerseys we stole at the end of our senior year. The Woodhole High gym is alive again with a pep band, some local big shots on stage in front of a giant screen, and even cheerleaders.

Coach Mac is wearing a suit as he comes on stage and congratulates us on our fine showing yesterday. Then, as Derrick shows videotape of us all going through our paces in the background, the coach begins to call off the names of those who made the cut. Two things surprise me. First, Mac names some of the women. Female football players? Bennie Lee, flashing his imitation gold tooth, explains how we're gonna have our own cheerleaders and how he's proud of hisself for naming them the LadyKillers. And Mac lists a lot of guys who never made it to the four o'clock payoff. Bennie Lee figures they must be on our practice squad.

'Course me and Bennie Lee make the cut, and we stand proudly.

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Bobby Beasley doesn't, even though I heard him tell Coach Mac he'd quit his job as bouncer over at one of those bars in the wet county next door, Tilghman, if'n he makes the team.

"Now, boys and girls, future Kentucky Killers," announces Coach Mac, "if you'll go out the side door, there are a couple of buses to take you out to the Holiday Motel. Officials—that means lawyers—from the MFL are waiting out there with contracts, some cameras to take publicity pictures, and a few complimentary drinks."

Well, we all climb aboard, and the three-bus caravan starts outta town as the rest of the townsfolk cheer us on. Me and Bennie Lee are hanging out the windows waving. When we get to the motel, I almost do something I ain't done since elementary school—wet my pants.

The parking lot is surrounded by Kentucky State Police cruisers. As we get off the bus, each one of us is handcuffed, fingerprinted, and read our rights. A man who says he's from the Social Security Administration announces over a bullhorn we're all being charged with fraud.

"Fraud, my butt," yells Bennie Lee in defiance. "Did you see that tape? We can all still play football."

"And," returns the government man, "the tape also shows you can all take direction and put in a full day's work. I didn't see a man or woman out there with 'bad nerves,' physical disabilities, or mental problems."

"But," Bennie Lee protests, "Coach Mac—"

"He's not a coach," says the SSA man. "He's a bounty hunter hired by the Commonwealth of Kentucky. He collects fifteen hundred dollars a head for every one he cuts loose from the draw. We're determined to get rid of you freeloaders who ruin the system for honest folks."

I look over at my big brother, the would-be arch-criminal, and say, "Busted."

Before he gets disbarred, Lawyer Sam cuts a deal with the government. They won't prosecute me if'n I find a job. As one of the only ones to apply, I get on at Wal-Mart. Wouldn't you know it, the first thing they got me doing is working in the parking lot, cleaning up oil spills. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

Murder by Ghost

by Amy Myers

"The most haunted place in the county. Know that?"

The ninth Earl of Sissingbrook's bleary eyes fixed Auguste Didier with a glare.

Auguste sighed. One of the unfortunate side effects of the magnificent cuisine he produced for the members of Plum's Club for Gentlemen was that there was always one left happily clutching a glass of brandy far into the night. It was one o'clock, a time when all decent chefs should be in their beds, dreaming of the delicacies they would produce the next day.

"No, your lordship."

"Ghosts everywhere at Ellencourt Place. That's why I wanted to see you."

Auguste was instantly wary. So this summons had not been just for another brandy, this one was personal. He was walking on eggshells, and so far he didn't like the look of the omelette.

"Headless horsemen, ghosts chucking stones and crockery, the limping nun—I'm used to all of them," his lordship continued gloomily. "This one's different. This ghost is after *me*."

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"Why?" Auguste enquired cautiously.

"It wants to murder me."

Auguste's instincts had been right. There was trouble brewing here. "A murdering ghost?"

"Why not?" The earl investigated the bottom of his now empty brandy glass. "Ghosts get away with murder all the time. They think they're immune, that they can just materialise and announce they want someone's blood, and no one will dare to stop them. They order people's deaths just like that. No respect for the law."

Extreme caution now. "Why did you wish to see *me,* your lordship?"

Auguste Didier, Amy Myers's most popular detective, is lured to a country estate in this new case involving a death threat seemingly from the beyond. Auguste is no stranger to ghosts: In the lastest Myers novel, *Murder in the Queen's Boudoir* (Severn House), Auguste's case concerns the ghost of Marie-Antoinette. According to Ms. Myers, the book was based on the famous incident at Versailles in which two ladies, both heads of Oxford colleges, claimed, in 1901, to have walked back into Marie-Antoinette's court. ✝

"You've got a reputation for sorting out the truth behind murders, haven't you? I want you to come and tell the blasted thing it's wrong. I'm innocent. You can cook us dinner if you like."

Dinner for a ghost? Auguste began to retreat hastily out of the room. It was the brandy speaking, he told himself. Tomorrow his lordship would remember none of this.

"Back here," came an instant roar. "I'll make it worth your while."

"Money, sir," Auguste tried to say bravely, "is not my concern. My presence at Plum's to cook dinner for other members is."

"I've fixed that. Had a word with the secretary fellow. You come and do your job at Ellencourt Place and I'll set you up in that cooking school you've always wanted to run."

Auguste paused in his own dematerialising act. No harm in enquiring further. "If the ghost wants to murder you, what reason does it have? What exactly does he think you've done?"

"It's not a he. It's a woman. She thinks I murdered her. All long robes and a laugh like a hyena. I know who it is. It's Marie-Antoinette."

That did it. A headless royal ghost was too much for Auguste even to consider arguing with face-to-face—if only because there'd *be* no face. It put paid to serving it dinner as well.

"Not the queen," the earl continued, reading Auguste's expression correctly. "My Marie-Antoinette was a can-can dancer at one of these Paris nightlife places. I first saw her there when I used to

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go on card-playing sprees. Changed her name to Maria when she married that dull old bore Robert Preston. She's come back to accuse me of having murdered her, and has the nerve to tell me I'll die for it this coming Saturday at midnight."

Auguste paled. "Why does she believe you murdered her?" Untactfully he added, "Does she remember your doing so?"

The earl turned purple. "She couldn't. I *didn't* do it. Years ago it was, fourteen to be precise, in eighteen eighty-three. Saturday is the anniversary. The second time I met her was in 'seventy-eight, two years after she married Robert. She was still a stunner so I turned a blind eye to her social inadequacies. She and I became—er—much closer friends. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was infatuated with her. All flashing eyes and skirts, if you know what I mean. I was younger then, of course, and not married."

"Did her husband know about your friendship?"

"Certainly he did," his lordship instantly retorted. "No complaints there. She'd done her duty by him. Produced two sons—though it's true she claimed one of them might be mine. She kept that from Robert. She only married him because he had money, one of those jumped-up industrialists. Then he lost it all. Until recently, that is."

Auguste noted that Mr. Preston's restored fortunes seemed to give the earl little pleasure.

"If you ask me," the earl confided, "Robert's grief at Maria's death didn't last too long. Fine-looking woman, but you couldn't take her anywhere. And temper! She could throw more china than all the Ellencourt ghosts put together."

Auguste endeavoured to make sense of all this. "You were present when she died?"

"Of course I was. We all were." The earl glared at him, obviously thinking Auguste's powers of deduction were far below expectations. "I'd just become engaged, and my fiancée, Judith, now my wife, was staying at Ellencourt. Then, damn me if Maria didn't get wind of it before I'd had a chance to tell her. She insisted on coming to join the party. When I said this would look damned odd, she said she'd drag Robert along too, and for good measure her brother, who was staying with them. Otherwise she'd tell Judith all about our little affair."

Only a very dim earl could have imagined this ensemble would provide an enjoyable house party. Auguste decided to keep this thought to himself.

"Her brother, François Duval, was one of those twitchy Frenchmen with a long nose stuck into everything. He's done well for himself considering his parents were provincial butchers. You'll meet him. The same party's coming on Saturday—minus Maria."

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"Apparently not," Auguste pointed out, while meditating on the earl's ability to stir up trouble for himself.

"Eh? Ah, see what you mean." The thought of his ghost's reappearance gave the earl no pleasure.

"And what happened on that evening in 'eighty-three?" Auguste enquired.

"Maria had taken the news that our affair was over surprisingly well, or so I thought. She only broke a few old Chinese vases and a couple of Staffordshire figures. Then I found she'd told Judith, not to mention Robert and François, that her younger son is actually mine. Rubbish, of course. He's far too ugly."

Auguste began to feel some sympathy with the ghost.

"Anyway, next morning Maria was found dead. Not a mark on her. No symptoms of poisoning, nothing. It was put down to a freak illness. Broken heart, I decided. She must have taken our parting harder than I thought." There was complacency in the earl's voice, which put Auguste even more on the ghost's side.

"Where does murder come in, then?" he asked.

"It didn't until this hag of a ghost popped up, screeching about my murdering her."

"Why now?" Auguste asked practically. "It's fourteen years ago."

"You tell me. You're the detective, and you're going to prevent my being murdered in my bed on Saturday."

Auguste wondered how to phrase his next question tactfully, and decided there was no such way. "Cannot your wife do that?"

A glare. "I sleep alone. Wish I could say the same about her."

Auguste decided not to comment, though he longed to satisfy his curiosity about the countess's private life. Instead he satisfied it on another strange facet of this story.

"Might I ask *why* you are inviting the same party to Ellencourt on Saturday? Is it an anniversary ritual?"

The earl snorted. "Damn fool notion of yours. No. Robert and François are coming to discuss business. Their request. I could hardly say no, especially as they said it's to do with Maria. Robert's second wife, Gertrude, will be coming, too. Probably wants to keep her eye on Judith."

Even more interesting. "What exactly do you want me to do, your lordship?"

"Not much," the earl barked. "Cook the dinner, and while you're serving it, find out who really murdered Maria, though I still think that ghost's got it wrong. She's turned up twice in the last week to tell me she's going to have her revenge, so on Saturday you can tell her whom she should be murdering instead of me."

Just like that. Auguste took a deep breath and prepared to defend his own skin. "I prefer not to, your lordship. Could you not

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spend Saturday night at Plum's? I understand ghosts don't travel."

"A Sissingbrook has never flinched in the face of battle," the earl roared. "We shoot only when we see the whites of their eyes."

Unfortunately, Auguste reflected, it would be he who was facing the whites of the ghost's eyes—if she had any. Balancing this prospect against the financing of his cooking school would be hard. On the other hand, the likelihood of this ghost turning out to be a true phantom, despite the earl's claim about Ellencourt Place's reputation, was small. A laughing and speaking ghost was equally rare. Ghosts, on the whole, were never funny; they wrung their hands in anguish. That was the whole point of them, for they imprinted their grief on the mists of time. Therefore it followed she was almost certainly a very material ghost, who would be intent on murdering her victim and not Auguste. It might therefore be possible to fulfill his duty by talking reason into her. In any case, he would be near to the earl so that the ghost could hardly walk through him into the room.

He recalled that in the previous century a ghost had appeared to a titled philanderer in similar circumstances to complain of her treatment and forewarn of his death, at a precise hour and on a precise day. His friends, invited to spend the night for his safety, advanced the clocks three hours, and the philanderer was much relieved when the apparent hour for his death passed without incident. Unfortunately the ghost would have been a strict adherent of Greenwich Mean Time, had that yet been established, for the wrongdoer duly expired at the correct spectral time.

Even as Auguste began to wage the battle with him over whether to accept the challenge, the earl himself assisted the decision by passing out and ungracefully sliding from his chair onto the floor. A touch of the bell brought two liveried Plum's footmen into the room to pick up the brandy-sodden customer and remove him to a bedroom for the night. Auguste presided over his departure with relief, for it meant he had the night to consider whether or not the financing of his cooking school was worth braving this haunted journey.

Certainly there must have been several possible motives for murder. There was only the earl's word for what had passed between himself and Maria, and he had to protect his position with regard to his fiancée. The husband could have murdered her in jealous fury at finding he was not the father of his own son. The earl's then-fiancée could have murdered her out of fury and jealousy. The brother—well, who knew what motives he might have? Money by inheritance was one possibility.

Nevertheless, to discover the truth about a fourteen-year-old murder during the space of a dinner—and still to dedicate himself

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to his usual high standards of cuisine—was a difficult assignment. Moreover, there was another factor that, interestingly, the earl had not mentioned, though it had been in the newspapers. He had referred to Robert's restored fortunes, but not to how this had been achieved. A large stone had recently been discovered in a chest of his late wife's effects stored in an attic, and had been identified as the missing Star Diamond, discovered a century ago and whose last known owner was an Indian maharajah. At his death in 1874 the stone had vanished and his family denied all knowledge of it. Now it belonged to Robert Preston, and he and Maria's brother were coming to Ellencourt Place "on business" connected with her. And then there was Gertrude Preston to consider, who according to the newspapers had singled out the stone as worthy of checking. Had she a role to play in this?

Could it be, Auguste wondered, that the appearance of the vengeful ghost at such a time was not entirely coincidental?

Ellencourt Place by day was an unprepossessing house, a medieval abbey much altered and expanded. The nuns would hardly have recognised their former home, Auguste reflected as the earl stomped around the house with him to show him the haunted terrain.

"The ghost materialises out there—" He pointed out over the garden from his first-floor bedroom. "She starts with a fiendish cackle to wake me up, and then shouts out her intentions."

Auguste looked carefully out of the window. Below him, slightly to the right, was the orangery, and beyond that the gardens. Directly below him was a drainpipe on an ivy-covered wall. Auguste could see possibilities in this arrangement and was somewhat relieved. He allowed the cooking school to float back within the realms of practicality—provided, of course, there was still an Auguste Didier alive to run it.

"Don't the servants hear anything? Doesn't anyone else see it?"

"There's no one except Judith on this side of the house, and she'd sleep through if the devil himself came to call. Servants are at the back of the house in the attics. The ghost keeps her voice down when she's speaking, but they've complained about the hyena cackles. When they come out to investigate, there's nothing there. Judith thinks I'm out of my mind, of course."

Auguste felt happier. It must surely be a very human ghost, some Pepper's Ghost illusion, perhaps, but it still had to be tracked down. Not to mention a murder solved in the space of an hour or so.

"Do your wife or the servants see the other phenomena?"

"Yes. I've seen one or two myself. The nun limps up and down the yew paths. Headless horseman gallops down to the lake from

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time to time—oh, and I've spotted the seventeenth-century cook from time to time."

Auguste froze. "What happened to him?"

The earl frowned. "Lot of fuss about nothing. One of the ancestors decided to take over the cooking, took a fancy to the meat cleaver, and the blasted cook objected. Damned nerve."

Auguste eyed the earl very carefully. If there was a tradition of expendable cooks in this family, not even his *Soufflé d'Auguste Didier* would save him. The ninth earl might well be mad. The threat would not be to the earl from a trick ghost, but to a very human maître chef from a temporary employer.

The appearance of other apparitions at Ellencourt was not reassuring, however. No trickster would prepare his ground years in advance by laying on unnecessary illusions in the form of limping nuns and butchered cooks. Therefore it was either a true ghost—or an earl aspiring to follow in his ancestor's tracks.

Auguste decided to turn his mind to the more rewarding aspect of his visit: the preparation of dinner. The least pleasant aspect of his career was that he was often obliged to serve meals to the unappreciative, but Auguste had conquered it by convincing himself that the delights of his cuisine were an art in themselves. Did Rembrandt consider the gaze of the unappreciative public before painting his masterpieces? Did Michelangelo? No. So Auguste Didier, too, would create for art's sake alone, and consign to the stewpot the thought that it might well be his last great offering to the world.

It was just as well, for the company collected for dinner that evening was not going to be appreciative. The days when de la Reynière gathered his friends together solely to act as juries on his cuisine were long past. The earl and his wife Judith—some years younger than he and a handsome woman in her forties—made a formidable couple. Robert, the industrialist, looked uninspiring, though he displayed the happy confidence of someone whom fate always saves at the last moment. Spectacularly so in his case, Auguste reflected. Star Diamonds did not appear every day. Monsieur François Duval appeared a humble Uriah Heep to whom Robert's slightest wish was his command, although his eyes, Auguste noted, were extremely sharp. Gertrude Preston, Robert's new wife, seemed the exact opposite of Maria, being a distinctly dowdy lady in her late thirties, though the set of her jaw suggested a strident domestic life. He had gathered that she had married Robert only months before the loss of his fortune, and that consequently her discovery of the Star Diamond was as delightful a surprise to her as it was to her husband.

Auguste remained in an unobtrusive position at the doorway, trying to look uninterested as to the fate of his exquisite goose *à la*

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Dauphinoise in the mouths of those clearly unappreciative diners. Whatever their thoughts might be centred on, it was not his cuisine, though how anyone could treat his John Dory in champagne sauce with such indifference was beyond his comprehension.

He wished that he could have advanced the clocks as had the friends of the victim last century, for that would at least have established whether or not it was a true spectre. Modern times, however, would quickly put paid to such a scheme, since there were far too many clocks and pocket watches nowadays for it to work. The ghost and its threat to the earl, moreover, were general knowledge.

"It doesn't exist," snorted Judith. "Such illusions are in one's own mind. I believe I heard something once, but when I looked from my window, there was nothing there."

"You think I'm planning my own murder, then?" barked her loving husband.

"Guilt," she decreed. "No doubt what the ghost claims is true, and you have merely moved it from within your mind to an imaginary external manifestation. Orestes and the Delphic Oracle, you know."

The earl clearly didn't, but his reply was forestalled by François Duval. "*Mais non,* Judith. My poor sister would never have sought revenge for her death. Always loving and gentle."

"You weren't married to her," Robert retorted calmly. "You did not know Maria, Gertrude, but she could be a devil. Remember that last evening when you killed her, Gerard?"

"I didn't," howled the earl. "And there's no proof she was even murdered."

"It's my belief," Robert pontificated, ignoring him, "that Maria was drugged, probably with laudanum, then suffocated."

"How very unpleasant," Judith murmured.

"You should know." François turned on her with unexpected venom. "You were there that night."

"Are you suggesting that *I* was involved?" Judith flared up.

"*C'est possible, Madame la Comtesse.* You had reason enough—if you believed my poor late sister's deranged wanderings. But it is more likely to have been Gerard himself. My poor sister could be mischievous, I acknowledge, but it meant nothing."

"It did," her husband replied curtly.

François took no notice. "It is possible she might have teased you, Gerard, with threatening to tell your fiancée, Judith, about your, shall we say, *amitié* with her."

"It was over, and Judith knew about it."

"Not till then," she sweetly whipped back.

Robert flushed. "Dammit, Maria *was* my wife."

"A loved one?" enquired Judith sharply.

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"No, but not enough to kill her." Robert was torn, Auguste could see, between a need to reassure Gertrude and to ensure his own safety.

The earl leapt in eagerly. "Stuff and nonsense, Robert. Hadn't Maria just told you one of your sons was mine? Not that I believe it, of course. But you might have done. If anyone suffocated her, you were best placed, being in the next room to her."

"Carefully maneuvred there by you," Robert snarled.

The earl refused to retreat from his belligerent stance. The whites of Robert's eyes had flashed, and would not find an earl of Sissingbrook wanting. "This ghost hasn't got a good memory. Of the two of us, only you had reason to kill her. I'd told her our friendship was over, gave her a present, and she quite saw my point."

"Why does that chef remain here?" François Duval threw casually into the conversation.

Auguste decided it was not for him to speak. He retained the impassive look adopted by all servants, cultivated over the centuries to indicate, firstly, that they are invisible, and secondly, that nothing said in the dining room would be discussed except in the privacy of the servants' hall and kitchens.

"He's here to find out which one of you two killed Maria in time to convince the ghost she shouldn't kill me but tackle the real murderer—if any," Gerard added somewhat anticlimactically.

A silence, broken at last by Robert. "A clever idea, Gerard, but you killed her. We all know that. We don't need a ghost to tell us."

"No motive," howled the earl. "Who can prove it's true?"

"Maria's ghost." François said in support of Robert.

"I don't believe in ghosts' ability to murder," the earl replied defiantly, "any more than they can recall the truth about their own deaths."

"Twelve o'clock will prove your point," Judith observed.

"In two hours' time. You'll have time for coffee, Gerard," chortled François.

"You believe in ghosts, Monsieur Duval?" enquired Gertrude, as if doing her social duty in keeping the conversation going.

"Non."

As if to challenge his belief, a noise suspiciously like a shower of stones raining against the windows startled the assembly.

Auguste moved quickly to the curtains and drew one aside. It was growing dark, and a stiff breeze was stirring the bushes. A branch or two gently rapped against the glass; a cat was strolling across the lawn; a pot had fallen on the gravel path. Any of them could conceivably have caused the noise, but it was not a good omen for the night ahead.

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At half-past eleven, a highly annoyed Auguste was standing in the gardens outside the orangery, his eyes peeled for ghosts rising over the bushes ahead of him. Secondly they were peeled for any intruders making for the drainpipe on the ivy-clad wall below the earl's bedroom. A hefty manservant was guarding the drainpipe itself.

Auguste was not happy for two reasons. Firstly, he had expected his vigil to take place outside the earl's bedroom *in* the house, not here, and secondly, this position hardly seemed ideal for his mission. True, the glass roof of the orangery behind him was unlikely to bear the weight of anyone hoping to approach the earl's room that way, but the huge windows were slanting open, which might allow someone access to the orangery and the cover of the bushes inside.

The earl had refused to allow him to stay in the house. The door into the corridor was locked and so was the door to the adjoining bathroom he shared with his wife; he gave Auguste a key to each. Any intruder would come via the window, the earl claimed, and Auguste and the manservant would make sure she didn't succeed. It was a moot point as to what would happen if it really was a ghost, who had no need of drainpipes. Presumably only Auguste's impassioned plea of the earl's innocence could then prevent catastrophe.

Moreover, before he left the earl, Auguste had had to confess that as yet he had no idea as to the cause of Maria's death.

"Her husband had reason to kill her, because although he knew of your relationship with his wife, he was unaware until that night that his younger son might be your child and not his. Your then-fiancée could have taken revenge after learning so cruelly about your affair, but the brother would seem to have no reason unless he benefited from the will. Was Maria rich? Under the Married Women's Property Act, she would be able to leave her money to whomever she wished."

"Robert was a rich man then. I believe Maria said she'd leave what she could to François to aid their family in France, but it wouldn't be much. But don't ask damn fool questions about Maria. *Tell* me who murdered the woman, and then tell her ghost. Otherwise I won't be alive in the morning to find out what this precious business is that they're so eager to discuss. Robert was all for meeting this evening, but I wouldn't have it. How could I have concentrated on business when a ghost was threatening to kill me an hour or two later?"

"Did she ever mention the Star Diamond to you? Did the maharajah give it to her during her stage career, perhaps?" Auguste had been interested that no mention of this had been made at dinner, although it had apparently been in Maria's pos-

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session at the time of her death. Revenge was a powerful motive, but money, in Auguste's experience, beat it. He received a quick answer.

"That's enough. I'm tired. Get out of here and do your job!"

Auguste obliged, and here he was, outside, as requested, doing it. The vehemence in his lordship's reply—if reply it could be called—was interesting. It suggested the "business" did have something to do with the diamond. If so, the whole perspective of what might have happened that night in 1883 was changed—which provided a discussion point with the ghost.

Auguste was aware he was ignoring the fact that the ghost, if immortal, might know exactly what happened, and be entirely uninterested in Auguste's wish to discuss it. Nevertheless, it gave him the right to ask for at least a stay of execution for the earl; he was relieved to have something to offer in the earl's defence.

He shivered. It was not warm, and very dark out here. It was also eerie, and the notion of discussion with a ghost took on an all-too-real aspect now that the time was coming. Would the ghost stand still and listen? Did one speak to a ghostly lady as to an earthly one? Would she reply or just screech? Would this murdering ghost chop down anything and anyone in her way? Would she even—terrible thought—send a deputy to do her dirty work? Jack Ketch the hangman, for example? Robespierre equipped with guillotine? A Medici to force poison down his throat?

"There are no such things as ghosts . . ." he muttered. "There are no such things as—"

And then he saw it. A misty light over the dense bushes in front of him—no, a *shape.* A shape within the light. Feverishly he began to run through his list of a hundred favourite recipes, a formula that usually sent him contentedly to sleep. Not tonight. Not with this thing dancing up and down before his eyes. A woman's shape, a grotesque grimace of fury on her face.

"Phantasmagoria," he told himself. "A trick. An illusion." But he could not convince himself. It was coming nearer. And nearer.

"Courage," he cried at it, *"le diable est mort."* Or was the devil dead? Was it not he in disguise coming for him now?

How could he *plead* with this thing? "Go away," he croaked inadequately. "The earl's innocent. Stop!"

She didn't.

"I need more time," he shouted. She halted for a moment, and encouraged, he tried again.

"You had a sad death," he shouted. "I shall discover the truth for you if you were murdered, so please spare the earl tonight."

As defending council's eloquent last plea, he rated it poorly, but the ghost seemed impressed. She retreated slightly, and in a burst of courage Auguste walked towards her, a trembling hand

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extended in a show of truce. The ghost receded further, and Auguste rushed at her, raising his arm to touch her—but there was nothing there. No substance, then no misty light, no ghost. Only a screeching peal of laughter.

He was alive. Weak from relief, Auguste rushed to the white-faced manservant by the drainpipe. He was gabbling in fear, and Auguste had to cut across him. There was no doubt he, too, had seen the apparition.

"Anyone come this way?"

"No," came the reply, just as the man collapsed onto the flower bed.

Auguste had to leave him there. His first duty was the earl. He hurried upstairs and produced his key to unlock the earl's door as arranged. Inside, one dim oil lamp lit the room. The earl was quiet, and fearfully Auguste approached. He was not breathing. He had not been suffocated. He had been strangled.

"It seems," Robert observed, as Auguste wearily joined the small group in the morning room, "that you didn't do a very good job in persuading the ghost of poor Gerard's innocence." They had all returned to their beds for a few hours' sleep, but Auguste had been present while doctors and police conferred over the late earl during the night.

"Perhaps he wasn't innocent." Too late, Auguste realised that Judith was present, and that this possibility was hardly tactful.

"My poor husband," she half sobbed, half shouted at him. "He is lying here dead, and I had told him I didn't believe in ghosts. You were supposed to defend him. What incompetence! Tell me what is happening, please."

"An inspector from Scotland Yard has been called." Auguste decided not to point out that only a few hours ago she had virtually been accusing her "poor husband" of murder. Nor would he mention that it had been his decision to telephone Inspector Rose. It had been a short and, for him, not sweet conversation. Through the crackles and hisses on the line, Egbert Rose had, as usual, come straight to the point.

"Who did it, Auguste?"

"A ghost."

Silence greeted this remark, but Auguste could guess the inspector's reaction. "So it appears," he added unhappily. This unfortunate choice of words brought back vivid memories of his own spectral experience.

"You nail it down. I'll bring the handcuffs."

The inspector would not arrive for several hours, time which might be valuable in determining what had happened. Auguste forced himself to concentrate on it. He had failed the earl, and

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owed him that much at least. It was all too possible that he had indeed murdered Maria, but why, and who had killed him? The earl had seemed genuinely terrified at Plum's, either because he knew he was guilty of Maria's murder, or because he knew he was innocent and needed that proven to be rid of the threat. If the former, then it seemed strange to ask Auguste to investigate, and if innocent, he must surely have had his own ideas about how she died. Vengeance was a favourite cry of returning ghosts, but murder had more practical aspects. Why would the earl have resorted to murdering Maria under his own roof *after* the damage had been done? Maria had already broadcast her son's parentage, and in her rage and anguish at her rejection had more reason to murder him than he her.

By the time Inspector Rose arrived, Auguste had managed an hour or two's sleep, and his brain informed him it was prepared to start work again.

"Where's this ghost, then?" Egbert asked briskly. "Lead on."

By day it was easier to be brave, and hard to recall the near panic that the previous night's illusion had brought. Reason now superseded fear, for the unknown could be made known. Auguste led the way to the high bushes that formed a wall around the rose garden. He walked with confidence because he already guessed what he would find.

"There," he pointed.

"All I see is a dead rosebush."

"A dying rosebush, ashes, and indentations on the ground."

"That's a ghost?"

"Yes, when brought to life by smoke from a lit brazier, coupled with a magic lantern and a determined murderer."

Egbert sighed. "Tell me."

"Phantasmagoria—an illusion perfected last century. The magic lantern casts up the image on a slide, and the smoke makes the spectre move. Sliding the lantern to and fro makes it advance and retreat. I thought at first the orangery provided the means for a Pepper's Ghost illusion, but the mist—or smoke—put that out of the question."

"Can you tell me how the murderer can be in two places at once? Playing tricks down here and up there strangling the earl?"

"No, but—"

"Or who it was?"

"No, but—"

"Or who, if anyone, killed Maria Preston?"

"No, but—"

Egbert grinned. "Glad I'm going to be of some use."

"My 'buts,' " Auguste retorted with dignity, "might be of some slight assistance."

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"We'll start with who killed the earl, then."

"The raw fish comes before the *sôle au chablis,*" Auguste objected. "The death of Maria Preston is the root of the dish."

"Forget about ghosts. My job is the earl. Who killed him?"

"Only one person could, in practice. His wife. No one could come through the door from the corridor. His wife would be most likely to have a key to the adjoining chamber."

"Is she strong enough to strangle her husband silently without at least the dickens of a row?"

"What if she put a sleeping draught in his coffee or brandy?"

"Possible," Egbert conceded. "Motive?"

"None that I know of, but—" Auguste eagerly proceeded to outline his theory on the Star Diamond being the "business" referred to by the earl. So far, there was no evidence to link the earl with the diamond at all, but suppose the diamond had been the parting present the earl had made to Maria? It was hardly likely that the earl would knowingly have given such a priceless gem away, but if he had been ignorant of its worth, it came back into the realm of possibility. And if the earl was concerned in "the business," then his wife, as—presumably—his heir, would be, too.

Egbert's eyes gleamed. "That's a 'but' worth hearing. We'll see what the lady says."

Lady Judith's face now showed little sign of grief or her earlier passion, though Auguste conceded that iron discipline could be controlling her expression until such time as she could be alone. To his pleasure, she was forthcoming about the "business."

"You are quite right, Inspector. This gathering was to discuss the diamond. It was most unfortunate. My late husband poured out the story to me a few days ago. The diamond had been his, but he, as everyone else, thought it worth very little. He had been given it as payment for a trifling gambling debt in Paris, and he gave it to Maria as a parting present that evening, telling her it was worth a great deal of money. Her maid, after the tragedy of her death, packed her possessions and took them back to the Prestons' home, where they were bundled into the chest in which Gertrude later found the stone. Gerard naturally asked to see Robert to discuss the matter."

"The late earl told me it was at Mr. Preston's and Monsieur Duval's request that the meeting was arranged," Auguste pointed out.

The glare from Lady Judith indicated that the arrangement for his cooking school was doomed.

"Naturally my late husband would not tell *you,* Mr. Didier, in case you enquired the reason for the gathering. It had nothing to do with the ghost and Maria's death. It was confidential."

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"Not now, your ladyship," Egbert Rose replied. "Tell us the reason, if you please."

"My husband had written to Robert to demand the diamond's return, or at least part of its value in cash. Robert had refused, but he needed Gerard to sign a statement that he had given it to his wife. I'm afraid Gerard was threatening to contest ownership. He was in a strong position as he could prove he had been given the diamond by the maharajah, but could claim that Maria had stolen it from him that night. Naturally Gerard could therefore hope for a substantial share of the money it raises. He was, I fear, not always an honourable man."

"And now that your husband is dead?"

"Robert stands to benefit greatly. There is no one who can deny his right to it, and I stand to lose a great deal of money. Someone in this house murdered my husband last night. A crazed servant, perhaps. As I had a key to Gerard's bedroom, you may perhaps be considering me as what I believe is termed a suspect. I trust you will now see that far from wishing my husband dead, I had every reason to keep him alive."

"We have established that the ghost was a mere illusion," Auguste told her. "If, as you gently imply, Mr. Preston might be responsible for your husband's death, he must also have been responsible for the ghost yesterday night, and for her two former appearances. How did he gain access?"

"That is simple. My late husband did not keep dogs, and entrance to the house was not necessary since the illusion appeared in the garden, so Gerard told me. I regret now that I did not believe him." A tear was permitted to roll down the iron-muscled cheek.

"Do you believe her, Auguste?" Egbert asked. "This murder required two people, one to work the illusion, one to strangle the earl. She had the key, which she could have lent to an accomplice, but on the other hand the local police have discovered that the housekeeper's master keys have vanished, which opens up a whole menu of choices. The most likely would be Robert and François."

"Why the ghost?"

"Pardon?"

"Why did the murderers—if there were two—bother to alert the earl to their plans by the ghost illusion if the diamond was the motive for the murder?"

"Leave the ghost out of it," Egbert said patiently.

"*Impossible.* The garnish is part of the dish as presented to the diner."

Back in his kitchen after Egbert had left to interview the three members of the house party, Auguste hoped the fog in his mind

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might clarify—until he remembered it wasn't *his* kitchen. Here he was only a passing guest. In *his* kitchen he knew where everything was. Everything fitted into a whole. The creation of a roast turkey *à la Financière* depended on the garnish—the ragout, the sweetbread, the truffles, the quenelles, and the glaze—and, of course, the timing of the turkey itself.

The timing—there was a stirring in his mind as the facts collected themselves together and slowly came to the boil.

Why had the ghost illusion been necessary? Who had killed Maria? And who had killed the earl? Now they began to set into a perfect soufflé—which all depended on timing.

That evening, Auguste found Egbert morosely contemplating the gardens from the orangery, and suggested they take a walk. "I know why the ghost was so necessary," he ventured.

Egbert sighed. "Forget the ghost."

"And I know who killed the earl."

"That's more like it." A slight stirring of interest.

"It begins with the ghost."

Egbert glared. "Quickly then. None of your rigmaroles."

"The ghost illusion was to draw attention to Maria's death—"

"Rather obvious, isn't it?"

"And its *timing.* Also to concentrate on that parting present the earl told us he gave her."

"The diamond."

"We only have Lady Judith's word for that."

"True." Egbert looked more interested. "What about the timing, then?"

"Maria died in eighteen eighty-three, a year after the Married Women's Property Act went through. That provided for any property belonging to the deceased *before* the Act was passed to belong to the husband automatically as before, but any property acquired *after* that date went according to the woman's will."

"So Robert had every reason to kill the earl, with the help of his wife Gertrude?"

"Yes. But only if the parting present *was* the diamond."

"Did the earl lie to his wife, or did she lie? She had nothing to gain."

"No, but her lover did."

"Robert?"

"If the parting present were not the diamond, and we have no evidence it was save one woman's word, then Robert would need the earl alive, not dead, in order to prove he gave the diamond to Maria much earlier. That was the business the earl told me Robert had asked to discuss. Otherwise François could contest ownership."

"So who murdered the earl?"

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"Underneath the garnish of this dish, I believe Lady Judith operated the ghost illusion. Our murderer was the lover whom the earl implied existed, and who was given a key to the door after Lady Judith removed the servants' master keys to deflect suspicion from herself."

"Robert?"

"No, François Duval. Together they planned to make it appear that the diamond was only given to Maria after the Married Women's Property Act came into force."

Egbert Rose considered this. "There's a flaw in your jewel, Auguste. He would have removed the earl, who could knock his claim to kingdom come, but still wouldn't have proof that it was given to Maria that night."

"No, but Lady Judith, I'm sure, would tearfully back his claim. Robert would be under suspicion of murder and would only have presumption of ownership. At the very least, the value of the diamond would have to be split."

"I'll take a slice of this dish of yours, Auguste," Egbert said at last. "In fact, I'll keep the whole cake. But who killed Maria?"

"No one. There was no murder. The parting present was not the diamond. Nor was there a ghost."

They were walking into the rose garden as Auguste spoke, and in the twilight something made him shiver. Was it the memory of that terrifying phantasmagoric figure swirling in a cloud of smoke last night? Or was it something else? Was it the stillness of a hot summer evening, as heat supersedes time and slows it to dream-pace?

From somewhere there floated a faint chuckle, and they saw the indistinct shape of a froufrou-skirted woman dancing along the path towards the arbour. Auguste could hear the beating of his heart—or was it Egbert's? For a moment he doubted his own reason. This morning he had seen the evidence of a human-created phantasm. What was this ahead of them? A gardener's bonfire, with his own fear superimposing the illusion of last night? Or—no, it was impossible. The earl had mentioned limping nuns, headless horsemen, and butchered cooks. This *thing* ahead of them was none of those. But "real" ghosts were never seen by more than one person at a time. He glanced at Egbert, who was very pale.

"Something we ate," Egbert managed to croak.

By the time Auguste looked back towards the arbour, the figure had vanished.

"It is the lobster we had this evening," Auguste gulped.

"Too rich. Not cooked by Auguste Didier."

Auguste did not hear him. A second chuckle was coming from the shrub rosebush at his side. ●

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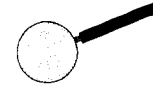

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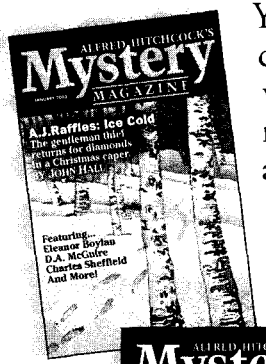

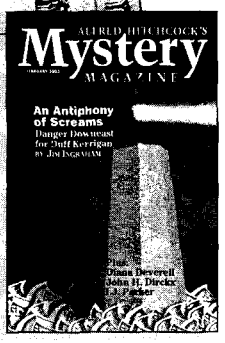

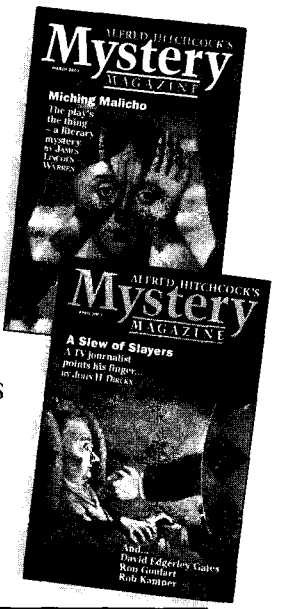

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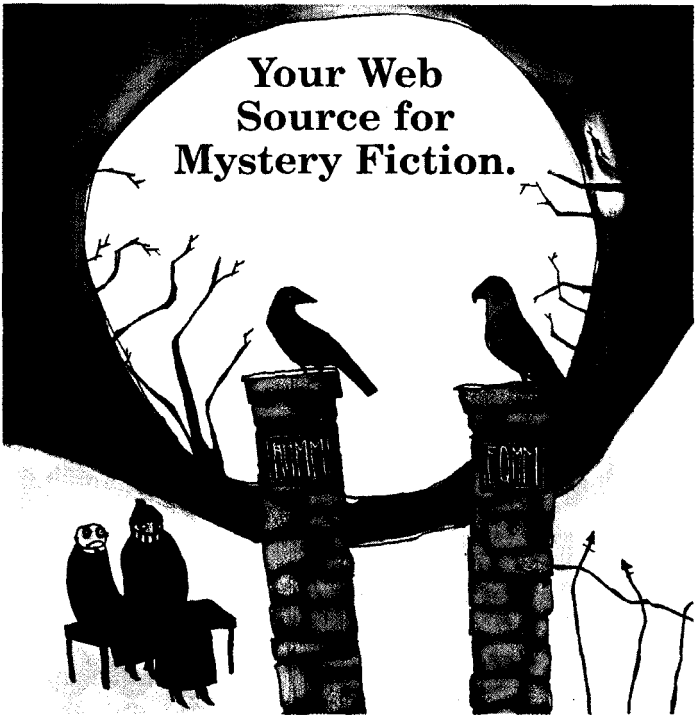

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